

## Chapter 1 – Forge

"HOLD HIM DOWN!" Yelled Dumbledore as the medical personnel on staff ran to Harry's side. The boy was thrashing around violently on the bed, giant cuts slicing open by themselves all over his body. The glow coming from his right arm almost made the entire thing impossible to do, but the medics somehow managed it. When they did, a disembodied voice shouted out.

"Now! Hold the Staff up! I will handle the rest!"

Snape, standing at the foot of the bed, did as he was instructing, lifting Ravenclaw's Staff into the air. Almost immediately, an erratic tendril of light extended from Harry's right arm, seeking out the Staff and taking hold of it. Snape released his grip as soon as Balthazar had gotten a firm grip on it. The ghost quickly began reciting something in a long-forgotten language. As he did, a burst of light shot from the head of the Staff, connecting with Harry's chest.

The thrashing ceased quickly and the cuts began to hiss as they sealed back up. But something else was going wrong now, as Madam Pomfrey suddenly cried, "His magical reserves are depleting too quickly! His core's in danger of rupturing!"

Balthazar's chanting picked up in pace and the light emanating from the Gauntlet grew even brighter, if it was at all possible. Shielding their eyes to look away, they could only just hear Harry's pained screams over the racket the spell was making.

"Is he alright?!" Asked Dumbledore.

But Balthazar didn't reply. And, at that moment, Ravenclaw's Staff exploded, sending burning splinters of wood in all directions. Several in the room cried out as they were impaled. The headmaster quickly rushed to the injured and began helping as fast as he could, keeping an eye on Harry all the while. The boy's eyes were open now, swirling with a deep blue light. His mouth was still open from his scream and blood was trickling from the sides.

"*IS HE ALRIGHT?!*" Dumbledore repeated.

"No!" Balthazar yelled. "He is dying! We have to hurry! Fit the final gem in its slot! I may be able to prevent his death, but it will be close!"

One of the mediwitches from St. Mungo's was closest to where the Eye of Caspar was grabbed it and, without thinking, slammed it into the barely-visible third slot on the Gauntlet. She let out a shriek as arcs of raw magical energy leapt from the Gauntlet onto her own arm. The headmaster ran back to the other side of the bed as the woman collapsed from the pain. She was unconscious and her arm was badly burned, but she had succeeded in getting the Eye in place. The energy was pulling it down and into the third slot, rotating it wildly as it went.

When it connected, an unearthly howl filled the air. The noise came from the Gauntlet itself as it began to fuse with the flesh and bone of Harry's right arm. This, in turn, caused Harry to let out a wheezing gasp before vomiting blood. Madam Pomfrey was quick to banish it, her wand flying swiftly as she performed check after check.

"He's beginning to stabilize, Albus..." She said, her brow creasing.

"Balthazar!" Dumbledore called. "How is he?"

"He is... alive." Replied the ghost, his form flickering to life above Harry's body. "But he is... near death. His magical reserves are as depleted as his life force."

"But he *will* survive?"

"He will survive." Confirmed Balthazar. "But we will need rest. Though my own power has been slowly returning ever since I was rescued, I have exerted too much. I... had not realized how strong the boy's magic truly was. It nearly cost us both our lives."

"Then rest. We will continue to monitor him until he awakens." Dumbledore said.

"Very well. And remember to never touch the Gauntlet until it has cooled. It will be white hot for several days. And, I suspect, Harry will be in great pain every second he is awake until the cooldown has finished..." Balthazar said, starting to fade.

The ghost vanished altogether shortly after that and the room fell silent for the first time in hours. Looking to the clock on the other end of the room, Dumbledore was only mildly shocked to see just how many hours had passed since they had begun the process. Everyone present was either injured or exhausted. And now that Harry was finally stabilizing, the rest of the men and women could also rest.

"Poppy, Severus, if you two could assist me with everyone that has been harmed..." Dumbledore said, glancing between the two, who nodded and began to move around the room, tending to the wounds of those involved.

"That was a hell of a thing." Scrimgeour said, walking over.

"Indeed it was..." Dumbledore breathed, rubbing at his temples.  
"Indeed it was."

"So what now?" Asked Quesland.

"Now," Dumbledore began, fixing the man with a mild glare, "You can return to where you came from. There's nothing left for you to see. Nothing will be going wrong at this point."

"No need to get so touchy, Dumbledore." Quesland said, smirking.  
"Merely here for the sake of seeing such an old relic be resurrected.  
That's all."

"And now you have seen it. Severus, once you get a moment, would you kindly escort Mr. Quesland to the edge of the grounds?" Dumbledore asked.

"Of course." Snape replied, a faint smile forming on the Potions Master's face.

Quesland looked somewhat disgusted at the prospect of being escorted out by Snape. "I can find my own way out, thank you." He stated, glaring back at the headmaster finally. "One day your little golden boy will screw up, Dumbledore. And when he does, we're going to take him in and dissect him. His magical talent is unnaturally high. We want to know *why*."

"I am sure you do." Dumbledore stated. "Unfortunately, Mr. Quesland, that is neither here nor there. Now then, if you do not wish me to ask Kingsley to *take* you away, I suggest you get out."

Dorian Quesland swore darkly under his breath, but turned and stormed out of the headmaster's quarters, slamming the door behind him. Moments later, a second slam was heard.

"I am sorry, Albus. He was quite insistent." Scrimgeour said, wincing.

"Quite alright, Rufus." Dumbledore sighed. "I know full well how those people can be."

"So now what?" Asked the Minister, turning to glance at Harry.

"...Now we wait." Dumbledore said. "And hope."

oOoOoOoOoOo

"This is horribly boring. I'd just like all of you to know that." Harry stated, glancing down at the wizard's chess board with open distaste written on his face. "Just because the pieces move and berate you doesn't change the fact that it's chess."

"Aw, come on!" Tonks pouted. "I saw you laugh when my rook flung Lupin's bishop clean off the table!"

"I did no such thing." Harry said, rolling his eyes.

"Did too! You saw it too, didn't you, mum?" Tonks asked, looking over to her mother.

"I was too busy consoling poor Remus." Andromeda replied, smiling down at the scowling werewolf, who was busy picking up his pieces and getting them reassembled.

"No one warned me you were this good at chess." Lupin grumbled quietly.

"No one knew she was." Harry stated. "As far as I remember, she's never played before."

"Yes I have!" Tonks said. "I've played against you *and* Leon!"

"Have you? Hm..." Harry murmured, frowning. "Seems like my memories still haven't 'settled' yet. Quite irritating, that..."

"Do you remember how we met?" Asked Tonks.

"Impossible to forget." Said Harry, smiling lopsidedly.

"Do you remember punching Malfoy out when you met him for the first time?" She chirped, grinning now.

"Remember? My knuckles still hurt."

"Do you remember Snape's stupid word puzzle?"

"I try not to, but yes."

"Then your memory's *fine*." Tonks declared. "Come on, someone else play me! I'm starting to feel sorry for Lupin."

"I'm not used to playing someone who's *GOOD*." Lupin argued. "Sirius was terrible at the game. But he still got a kick out of it. Always so damned sure he was going to beat me. He never *did*, of course, but it didn't stop him from trying."

"Exactly. Which is why Harry needs to play against you. He's the thinking type. I'm impulsive. You'd probably start a winning streak against Harry, though!" Tonks said.

"Oi oi..." Harry muttered. "...You're not going to pipe down until I give it a try, are you?"

"Nope!"

"...Fine." Harry said, pushing himself out of the chair he was in and moving to kneel next to Tonks at one side of the coffee table. Andromeda and Lupin were sitting on the couch on the other side. "You can go first, Moony. I don't figure it's going to matter much, though."

Lupin, who had just finished placing the chess pieces back onto the board (and getting thoroughly chewed out by them for losing again), let out a chuckle. "As you wish, Harry. But I won't go easy on you."

"I'm not planning to roll over and surrender either." Harry stated, smiling pleasantly.

"Hey mum, can we have some popcorn?" Tonks staged whispered to her mother.

"No, Nymmy." Andromeda said. "This shouldn't take too long. The popcorn would be done far after they were."

Andromeda, as it turned out, couldn't have been further from the truth. The first (and only) match that Harry had against Lupin wound up being just shy of three hours long. Both men sat and calculated all of their options before moving pieces. And despite her initial whining of being bored, as the match progressed, Tonks found herself glancing back and forth between the two. Harry had gone into deep thought long ago, eyes darting from one piece to the next as he tried to decide what to do. As Harry thought, Lupin tried reading what Harry would do in order to plan out his own line of attack.

After awhile, it looked as though Lupin was going to lose again. Still feeling rather sorry for him, she leaned in to quickly whisper something to Harry. Whatever it had been, it was enough for Harry to lose track of his thoughts for a single turn. It was all Lupin had needed, though.

"Checkmate." Said the werewolf, grinning triumphantly.

"Damn!" Groaned Harry, letting himself keel over backwards onto the floor. He gave Tonks a sour face and muttered, "I was cheated."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Tonks said, looking innocent.

Letting his arms flop out to the sides, Harry groaned again. "I was so close..."

"If it weren't so late, I'd let you challenge me to a rematch." Lupin said. "As it is, Andi and I need to get going. Albus said he wanted to mention something about the next meeting and as it stands, it might make us late to our dinner reservation."

Harry waved a dismissive hand. "Then get going. If the chess pieces are strewn throughout the house when you return, it's because I chased Nym around, pelting her with them."

"Hey!" Tonks cried.

Laughing, Andromeda walked over, giving her daughter a hug. "Can you two handle your own dinner?"

"I can cook even if she can't." Harry said. "It'd probably help me wind down. Haven't cooked for anyone in ages, it feels like."

Andromeda nodded. "Alright, then. Remus, are you ready?"

"Once I get the queen off of my blasted ear..." Growled the werewolf, as his queen had bit down on his ear and was refusing to let go.

"Oh, just bring her along for the ride. You'll make a fashion statement." Andromeda said.

"That statement being 'look at me, I'm a colossal ponce.'" Harry said, jabbing a finger into the air. A moment later, the queen bounced off his forehead. "Ow!"

"You deserved that." Lupin stated, grinning down at Harry. "Thanks for the matches, you two. It was fun, even if I should have technically lost the last one."

Tonks giggled as Lupin and Andromeda made their way to the front door. Once they had gone, she leaned over Harry and asked, "You aren't mad, are ya?"

"No, but that was a dirty trick." Harry said, cracking one eye open to glare weakly at Tonks.

"Yes, which it why I used it. You're so cute when you're caught off guard." Tonks said, kissing Harry's forehead where the queen had bounced off of it. "So - dinner, then?"

"Food. If I can be bothered to move, I will begin our dinner. Anything sounding good to you or should I rummage around and surprise you?" Asked Harry.

"Mm... surprise me." Tonks said.

"As you wish, milady." Harry said, sitting up and stretching. "Ugh... didn't expect to take that long."

"Lupin looked pretty happy about it, though." Tonks said.

"Yeah. Probably hasn't had many chances to sit and play games lately. I guess it was pretty fun..." Harry admitted.

"See? It's good to let loose and have fun every so often." Tonks said.

"Be glad I'm not going to hold you to your word, by the way." Harry said, giving Tonks the evil eye as he stood up. "I was thinking about it, but decided to be noble about the matter."

Snorting, Tonks swatted Harry on the backside as he walked past (and causing him to let out a highly undignified yelp) and replied, "And that's why I said it. Enough to distract you, not enough to make you go through with it."

"You're evil, woman. Anyone ever told you that?" Harry asked, shaking his head as he disappeared into the kitchen.

"You do. Quite often, in fact!" Tonks chimed, grinning as she got to her feet and hopped in after him. "Want any help?"

"Sure. I'm afraid I'm a bit rusty. This may not be the best thing we've ever eaten." Harry warned.

"Ah, it'll be fine. If not, we can just order a pizza or something." Tonks said.

"Now there's a romantic dinner. Delivered pizza." Harry said.

"Quiet down and get to cooking, O Mighty Chef." Tonks said, sticking out her tongue.

"Aye aye, sir." Harry said, saluting Tonks before turning to inspect the contents of the fridge. "Now then... let's see what our options are."

An hour later, stomachs full, the two returned to the living room. Sitting on the couch, Tonks slumped over against Harry and closed her eyes. Harry blinked, but smiled and put an arm around her.

"Harry?"

"Hm?"

"What's on your mind?"

"...Probably not a good question these days."

Tonks' head shifted slightly. "What do you mean?"

"I know you aren't entirely happy with who I've become since the merger occurred, Nym. No need to hide it. Unfortunately, I can't return to who I was. I'm not sure how different I'll be after I fuse with the Gauntlet, either. With the full stock of magic to tap into at any time I want, I could be driven insane from the procedure." Harry said, letting his head tilt back and his eyes unfocus. "There's really no telling. In addition, I don't like being so close to Number Four. Malfunctioning magic or no, I want to go and punish him for everything he's ever put me through. One of the greatest moments of my life was using the Sectumsempra on him and lifting him off the ground with it. A part of me simply wants to get rid of him entirely. No one on this planet would miss Vernon Dursley."

"Murder is still murder." Tonks commented.

"Justify Snape." Harry said, glancing down. "He's murdered how many? And for what? To keep his cover? Two men have asked him to willingly kill - Voldemort for giving the orders and Dumbledore for asking him to return. Snape is weak. He's weak and he's a coward.

He only looks out for himself. He doesn't give a damn about anyone else. He wants to look useful in Dumbledore's eyes. If he doesn't, he probably thinks the headmaster will abandon him. And so he is allowed to slaughter the innocent. And what of me, Nym? What of me? I had to suffer abuse at the hands of Vernon Dursley for years and yet he still lives. And I would be considered a criminal if I were to kill him."

"...This has been building up for awhile, hasn't it?" Tonks asked, sitting up and looking at Harry properly. "Why didn't you ever talk to me about it?"

"Wrong side was active more often." Harry muttered darkly.

"Oh. ...Look, you can't let this eat you up, Harry. Lots of bad people are allowed to live while good people die too soon. Life is unfair like that." Tonks said, frowning.

"It shouldn't be." Harry said, shaking his head. "Men like Vernon Dursley should be the ones begging on the streets and shivering in the cold of night. And yet he was given everything he'd ever want. A wife, obedient until nearly the end. A son who was raised the same way he was. A steady job, a good home, and a *slave* to do his god damned bidding! And yet Leon gets killed by the woman who made him suffer all these years. There isn't an ounce of fairness in the world, Nym. Not a bloody bit of it. But as soon as I fuse with the Gauntlet, things are going to change."

"Change? How so?"

Bringing his right hand up and flexing his fingers thoughtfully, Harry murmured, "I won't let anyone suffer the way I did. I won't let them be killed the way he was. I'll protect everyone like I've always said I would. The only difference will be the fact that I'll have access to the power needed to fulfill that promise."

"Harry..."

"You probably think I'm foolish to think this way. It doesn't really matter. It won't change anything, after all. Because things will be

different once I have full access to my own power. Maybe this time the change will be one you approve of." Harry said, glancing off.

"Hey! I never said... dammit, Harry, stop putting words in my mouth!" Tonks yelled, glaring at Harry. "Sometimes... it just feels like it's still the other you there instead of the one I knew before the split occurred. The way you talk... the talk about killing. It's all the same as him."

"It might get worse after the Gauntlet is reforged. Are you willing to accept that possibility, Nym? That you might lose the me that you loved altogether?" Harry asked.

"...I'm not going to abandon you, if that's what you mean. No matter what happens, I'm not leaving your side. I just don't want to see you get hurt anymore. Don't you get that?" Tonks asked.

"I'm not sure I do." Harry said, closing his eyes. "Sometimes my thoughts get jumbled up and I can't think straight. Sometimes it feels like I can't relate to anyone now that I'm back together again. It makes talking to others difficult. Like right now. Before the Ministry happened and this mess started, this night could have been perfectly romantic. Now, though, look what it's become. Me talking about killing and wondering if you'll still care about me if I lose my mind."

"You haven't gotten things off your chest in a long time, Harry. It's not unusual for you to be feeling confused at times. You've had a rough year. You've been split in two and then rejoined. Anyone would be second-guessing themselves in a situation like that. That you've been able to continue on while acting at least partially like how you used to says a lot about your strength..." Tonks said, leaning against Harry again. "I love you, Harry. That's not going to change, no matter how much you do."

"...Thank you." Harry said, quietly.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry opened his eyes slowly, wincing at the loud noise assaulting his ears. This... decidedly was not his magical core's landscape. There was no field, there were no trees, and there was certainly no lake. Eyes squinted, he glanced around himself. He was inside something,

apparently, as he wasn't standing on the usual grass he had grown accustomed to seeing. This place felt almost... mechanical. Almost like a clock, really.

As he started to look up and around, it became clear that he was, in fact, inside a clock. Or, at the very least, something resembling one. The floor he was on was grated and a dull grey color. It spread a few feet up the walls, melding into a deep brown that extended as far as he could see. If there was a ceiling to this room, it was somewhere in the inky blackness above him. And, spread along the wall and moving constantly, were massive gears. In some places, the gears seemed to vanish into a wall, yet still managed to move as though they weren't just half there.

A nearby ramp led up to the floor overhead, which looked similar to the floor he was currently on. And, as he walked around the area, he found a latch that made a part of the floor drop. And just as he couldn't see the ceiling, neither could he see the real floor of the place. He was somewhere in the middle of a massive clock tower that, for whatever reason, had replaced his tranquil landscape.

A clanking overhead caused Harry to jump and jerk his head up. Someone was walking around up there. Harry couldn't make much out, but whoever it was certainly didn't seem to be planning an attack on him. He glanced at the ramp leading up. For some odd reason, he felt drawn toward it now, as though something was calling out to him.

Glancing upwards again quickly, Harry turned and did what his instincts seemed to want him to do. As he walked, he kept his eyes focused on the person that was walking on the floor above his own. When he got high enough to see the person from a better angle, he was met with even more confusion. He had never seen this person before in his life.

A young wizard, looking to be in his mid-twenties, was pacing around in a circle, a quiet look of contemplation on his face. Near him was something Harry hadn't noticed from below - it was a thin table. The table held little more than an unlit torch.

"Uh... hello?" Harry said, stepping up and onto the new floor cautiously.

The man stopped, turning to look at Harry strangely for a moment. Then he nodded to himself slowly and murmured, "I've been expecting you. I was worried. It took longer than it should have. I do hope everything's alright. Have a seat."

"But--" Harry began, starting to say that there was nowhere *to* sit. ...Only there was now. A comfortable-looking chair had apparently popped into existence quite literally out of nowhere. It stood next to the thin table. Cocking an eyebrow and tilting his head, Harry walked toward the chair. "...Who are you?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. My appearance and whatnot. I probably should have warned you before - it might have sped this up a bit." Said the man, looking flustered. As Harry sat down in the chair, the man walked over and extended his hand. "My name is Balthazar Vesperov."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Hey Nym?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm bored."

Tonks rolled onto her side and lazily draped an arm over Harry's chest. "So get some sleep. It *is* one in the morning."

"Can't sleep. Thinking about too much stuff." Harry said, staring up at the ceiling.

"Still? Anything new?" Asked Tonks.

"Not really. Trying to fit everything into place. As usual, a few pieces are missing. Still wanna know who Sergei Wagner really is and why things seem to have revolved around him for awhile now. They aren't telling me things. I hate it when they don't tell me things. Why I haven't gone off on my own yet is beyond me. They clearly don't think too highly of me if they're keeping important information from me. Even if it isn't important to them, it might be to me." Harry explained.

Yawning, Tonks moved her head over to Harry's right shoulder. "I think you're over-thinking things, Harry."

"I'm a Ravenclaw with the weight of the world on his shoulders. Over-thinking things is what I do for a living." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"C'mon. Shut your brain off and sleep. Sleep is good." Tonks stated, nodding slightly. "Sleep is always good."

"Not for me it isn't." Harry muttered.

"Yes, well, I'll be here to chase the nightmares away. So stop thinking, stop talking, and try to get some rest." Tonks murmured, her voice growing quieter as she spoke.

Harry glanced down at the girl, only to find that she had nearly fallen asleep mid-sentence. A faint smile on his face, Harry kissed Tonks' forehead before turning to stare up at the ceiling again. The call from Dumbledore was going to come any day now. He was growing more and more anxious as time passed. It was only a matter of time until he would be spirited off to get the Gauntlet attached to his right arm. It was certainly going to change his and Tonks' sleeping positions, that much was sure. It wasn't going to be quite so bad for him, as he slept on his back all the time anyway. But Tonks had a difficult time falling asleep unless she was on her left side.

*'Never thought I'd miss having another voice in my head to talk to.'* He thought bitterly, letting his eyes close again. All was quiet after that, save the sound of Tonks' slow breathing and the various night creatures going about their business. It was going to be a long night for Harry, as he wasn't tired in the slightest. And, with all that was going through his head, a lone thought slipped through - one that he felt rather accurately described his situation.

*'This sucks...'*

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Balthazar? ...Wait, what? What the hell's going on?" Harry asked, looking bewildered. "What might have sped up a bit?"

"What's going... oh, this! Right, sorry. Mind's overworking itself. What sped up was the change to your magical core." Balthazar said, pacing aimlessly, brow creased. "See, when the Gauntlet fused, it also effectively fused us together. Now me being a spirit, the change is mostly a cosmetic one. But I need a place to dwell so long as I'm here. Somewhere I can effectively control the ebb and flow of your magic!"

"So you... what, overwrote my magical core's landscape with your own? Is that what this is?" Asked Harry.

"No, nothing quite that drastic. But I have twisted it to suit my own needs. This tower will help me immensely. I wasn't quite expecting your magical powers to be so great, Harry. I knew you were strong - you *did* rescue me successfully, after all - but I wasn't expecting *this*. I had to think of something on the fly, as the forging process was rapidly killing you. If I hadn't taken control like this, you would've died in a few seconds." Balthazar said. "This place might not make much sense to you, but I know the place inside it out. Try not to worry about it too much. It won't affect you in any noticeable way, I'm sure!"

Harry brought a hand up to rub at his eyes. "Right... okay, next question - why do you look so young?"

"This place exists like a dream would, Harry." Balthazar said, smirking faintly. "Do you think I'd present myself as my real, ghostly form or my youthful one, given the choice? It wasn't fun growing that old only to seal myself in the gem, you know. But I did it for the greater good. It's just a shame it's taken this long for that good to finally come about."

"Okay, I think I see." Harry said, nodding slowly. "Guess that's why I can see without my glasses..."

"You really should get rid of those." Balthazar commented, busying himself across the room. "I was told there's been tremendous advances in magical technology since my days on the planet. I wouldn't mind seeing a bit for myself."

"I know, I know. I've been thinking about magical contacts for awhile now. I may go ahead with it now. I'm going to look different this year anyway - why not, right?" Harry said.

"Exactly!" Balthazar cried, making Harry jump slightly. "So... there's a bit to discuss. And by that, I mean I'm basically going to tell you how to use the Gauntlet."

"And I can chime in if I have questions?"

"Correct. It's actually a very simple process. The moment the thought enters your head, I can read it. I'll help channel your magic safely so that you can release whatever amount you want without risk of endangering yourself. This isn't to say that there isn't an inherent danger to loosing so much magical power at once, however. Let's say you did something that needed eighty percent of your magical pool, just for the sake of argument. Expelling that much of your reserves, even with me here to help, will leave you in bad shape. Imagine blasting holes at the bottom of a barrel full of water, then scrambling to stop them up before all the water flows out." Balthazar explained, walking back towards Harry. "A better way of putting it, especially in your case, would be destroying a part of a dam and then being unable to stop the resulting cascade of water. This isn't to say you *can't* do it, but I'll try and warn you when you're reaching that."

"No different there, then. Push myself too far, wind up in trouble." Harry said.

"Something like that." Balthazar continued. "Now once you wake up, you're going to be very, very vulnerable for a period of time. You're going to be completely unable to use magic until the Gauntlet finishes cooling down. Do you remember the pain from it burning before you blacked out?"

"All too well." Harry muttered, glancing down at his right arm and rubbing at it. "How long will it take to cool down?"

"Not sure. No one's survived the forging process!" Balthazar said, smiling pleasantly. "We imagined it could take up to a month. In your case, I wouldn't be surprised if we could cut that time in half. Dumbledore spoke to me a good deal about how quickly you seem to

recover from things. That's good - it means you'll be back in action sooner. However, you need to know that you'll have to take it slow once the Gauntlet does cool down. You need to get used to me being here and helping to control your power. I'd prefer going somewhere secluded to get a few practice spells off, as well. That way I can gauge your intrinsic power and figure out just how much magic to let through."

"Sounds like a plan. ...Okay, so next question - we're talking about the Gauntlet cooling down, right? Is this just in regards to it finishing the fuse with me?" Harry asked.

"Unfortunately, no. The Gauntlet's going to be physically very hot." Balthazar said. "Now this heat shouldn't affect *you*, as you're the one wearing it. Dumbledore and I spoke on this. He said that he could figure out a way to keep your arm bandaged up until the cooldown finishes. Something about heat-resistant wrappings or spells or something."

"Great, I'm gonna end up looking like I'm part mummy when school starts." Muttered Harry. "I don't suppose I'll be able to sleep with Nym until the cooldown finishes, huh? She sleeps on that side of me."

"It would probably be best if you slept apart until afterwards, yes." Balthazar confirmed. "And again, I know it's going to be rough at first. But once we get beyond that..."

"Smooth sailing?"

"All the way."

oOoOoOoOoOo

The very next night turned out to be when Dumbledore had decided to call. Oddly enough, he had called when Tonks had left the room. It had been for the best, though - the headmaster had told him that he wanted to spirit Harry off in the dead of night; that the fewer people knew the better, no matter how close to him they were. Harry argued, but eventually gave up. He could always make it back up to Tonks later. Besides, she knew he was probably going to up and vanish for

awhile at some point. And Harry had no doubt that Dumbledore would let the Tonks women know where he was after the fact.

So Harry agreed and Dumbledore quickly excused himself. Around that time, Tonks had wandered back in, asking if Harry had been talking to himself. Harry had shrugged and quickly said that he was just trying to sort things out in his head again. This seemed to be enough for Tonks, who sat back down next to him and stretched out.

When it came time for everyone to turn in, Harry made an excuse for himself, saying he wanted to just sit and think for awhile. Tonks offered to sit up with him, but he shooed her off to bed, saying that he was probably going to just stare at one spot for a few hours. He told her to imagine the chess match, then extend it by not moving whatsoever. Tonks scrunched up her nose at this and had decided, with a great amount of nodding, that it would indeed be better to go and get some sleep. Before leaving, she told Harry that if anything was bugging him, he could tell her.

After that, Harry waited. For nearly an hour, he waited, being bored out of his mind. A mind which, when met with outright silence, seemed to refuse to work for once. He couldn't focus his thoughts if his life depended on it. Everything was finally getting under way. He was finally going to get the Gauntlet put on. As he sat there, he brought his right arm up, running the fingers of his other hand up it. It was going to be odd not having his own hand and skin there after tonight. But it was for the greater good. If he was stuck using the thing forever, then that's what he would do.

After that and until Dumbledore's face finally popped into the fire, Harry subconsciously tried popping the fingers on his right hand every so often.

When the headmaster did show up, he spoke quickly and quietly. "Are you ready? Almost everyone has gathered. All we need is you."

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be." Harry murmured, moving close to the fireplace.

Dumbledore nodded and, in an instant, the flames in the fireplace burned green and flared up. The headmaster stepped through, sparing only a moment to banish the soot he brought along with him.

"Going via Floo, then?" Harry asked, frowning.

"I know you do not like it, Harry. Rufus has connected Andromeda's fireplace with the one in my personal quarters. He is awaiting word of your arrival. Once it gets to him, he will join the rest of us." Dumbledore explained. "After you, then."

Harry sighed, taking a handful of powder and muttering darkly about his knees. Dumbledore told him what, precisely, to say when he gave out a destination to the flames. Harry nodded and did as he was instructed. And, moments later, he came hurtling out of Dumbledore's fireplace. As expected, he landed awkwardly and promptly cracked one of his knees on the floor.

Biting down on his lower lip harshly to cover the need to swear, he quickly rolled over and clutched his aching leg. When Dumbledore came back through, he gave Harry a chuckle before heading over to Fawkes. The phoenix then vanished in an explosion of flames, leaving the echo of his trill behind. Once he had gone, Dumbledore returned to help Harry back to his feet.

"Alright?"

"Been better."

Chuckling again, Dumbledore put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Rufus should be through the fireplace of my office soon. Once he has, Fawkes will return."

"Who's out there?" Harry asked.

"Severus and Poppy, along with several from St. Mungo's. They are to watch your health and do whatever they can to ensure that you do not slip away from us." Dumbledore explained.

"The medical team. Bit surprised Snape's a part of it. I guess it makes sense, though." Harry said, tilting his head somewhat. "...Who else?"

"Obviously, Rufus will be there. In addition, Kingsley has asked to be present. As the new head of the Auror division, he wishes to see the forging of such an old relic for himself..."

"...What aren't you adding to that?" Harry asked, fixing the headmaster with a shrewd gaze.

"...That Dorian Quesland has also asked to be here." Dumbledore said, making a face as he spoke the man's name.

"You've got to be kidding. What the hell does he-- what am I saying, he wants to be here in case something screws up." Harry said, shaking his head. "There was nothing you could do to keep him away?"

"I do not like him being here any more than you do, Harry. But we must try to keep Muggle and wizard relationships up, even if it means having someone of his nature here. Try not to worry too much, though. If something does go wrong - and I firmly believe that nothing will - then I will do everything in my power to ensure that you do not get taken off to Torchwood Four in the dead of night."

"Appreciated. The last thing I need is for those people to dissect me like I was some kind of bloody science experiment. Are they still trying to keep up the bluff that it's missing?" Asked Harry.

"So it would seem." Dumbledore said. "If you ask me, they are not doing a very good job of it."

"Yeah, that's what I was gonna say." Harry said. "I found out where it was and I'm 'merely' a student. It's their own fault, asking for wards around the place."

Dumbledore opened his mouth to say something, but Fawkes suddenly reappeared.

"Ah. I take it Rufus is on his way?" Asked the headmaster.

Fawkes let out a series of soft chirps.

"I will take that as an affirmative." Dumbledore said, smiling. "Well then, Harry - shall we?"

"If we must. I want you to know that any harm that might come to Dorian Quesland should be considered an accident and that I *don't* think he's a greedy, pontificating buffoon."

"Duly noted." Replied the headmaster, his tone dry. Walking over to the door to his quarters, he pulled it open and took a step back. "After you."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Hey Balthazar?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"There's something I've been meaning to ask."

"Shoot."

Harry glanced over. "What kind of man were you in life?"

"Well," Replied Balthazar, cocking his head to one side, "I suppose I was good enough. I did help create the Gauntlet, after all. My intentions have always been good. But I wasn't a saint or anything. Why?"

"Just curious as to what path you walked. There might be a few things I want to do that most wouldn't approve of."

"Such as?"

"Before I answer that, I think you should know a bit more about *my* past. This may take awhile..." Harry said.

"What else are we going to spend time doing?" Asked Balthazar, turning to scan a row of books. "It's going to be awhile before you wake up, after all."

"Alright. Just... wait until the end and hear me out, okay? There's something I've wanted to do for about a year now. And once the

Gauntlet cools down, I think I can finally realize that dream." Harry said, smiling darkly.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Letting out a quiet groan, Harry opened his eyes. Bad idea. A groan escaped from his dry mouth and he coughed. "Ugh..."

"Awake already? Always the one to defy the odds." Dumbledore chuckled. The headmaster was sitting in a chair across the room, reading a book. "How are you feeling?"

"Hot." Harry murmured.

"That would be the Gauntlet. Do not worry, it will cool off soon. Would you care for something to drink?"

"Very, very cold water." Harry said, cracking one eye open again. "Maybe less light."

"Of course." Said Dumbledore. Marking his place in the book, Dumbledore set it down before moving to draw the curtains. "Easier on your eyes?"

"Much. Thanks."

As Dumbledore went to prepare a cold glass of water, Harry forced himself to sit up. "It... it isn't really heavy at all." He said, glancing down at the Gauntlet. The device had devoured his right arm nearly to his elbow, where a curved, blade-like extension jutted out from the back side. It was glowing white at the moment, but he knew that would eventually fade to red, then finally to gold. From what he could tell, though, the Gauntlet looked bulky. It was certainly different from the small, broken version he had put on. He could only just make out the glowing of the three gems that had been slid into place on the back of where his wrist should have been. Sitting in a row, the gems almost seemed to pulse every few seconds.

"How ya doin' in there?" Harry asked, rubbing his throat with his left hand as he looked at the Soul.

"Tired, but better." Came Balthazar's weary voice. "I'll be able to manifest soon, I feel. But it may be awhile."

"Sounds like we're both gonna have to take it easy for a few days." Harry said. Dumbledore walked back over then, holding the glass of water out. "Thanks."

He winced as the cold liquid slid down his throat. "Sss... oh man. If I'm never in a situation like this again, it'll be too soon..." He grumbled. Looking back up at the headmaster, he asked, "So what's happened since you got me?"

"We have relocated people back to Number Twelve for now." Dumbledore said. "I believe you are going to get an earful from Miss Tonks next you see her. And for that, I apologize."

"I'd believe that a lot more if you weren't trying to bite back a grin." Harry said, glaring weakly at Dumbledore. "...Oh man, I feel like I've been run over by a truck. When do you think I'll be good to join the others?"

"As soon as you can stand up without feeling dizzy and not a moment sooner. Poppy would have my head otherwise." Dumbledore stated, moving back across the room to sit back down. "Concentrate on resting, Harry. Nothing has been happening in the time since I got you. It has been a quiet couple of days. Nothing more, nothing less. Rather boring, in fact."

"I hate resting. I hate getting damaged to the point of *needing* to rest. ...And despite that, I want to kill Voldemort so I *can* rest. If that makes sense." Harry said, bringing the glass of water up to his mouth again. "I dunno how quiet the world'll be after I bring him down, but it'll have to be better than it is now."

"Undoubtedly true." Dumbledore said, conjuring a small ball of light to read by. As he picked his book back up, he looked up at Harry and smiled. "The important thing, however, is that we have a better chance at ending his insane plans sooner now that you have the Gauntlet. And the sooner that happens, the sooner all of us can rest."

Yawning, Harry leaned over and set the half-empty glass on the table next to the bed. He frowned as he slid back down in the bed. "I wonder how the devil I'm going to write with this thing on my hand."

"You'll have to get used to holding things differently. I can assist you in not discharging any magic from the fingertips of the Gauntlet, but you'll ultimately be the one who decides what happens." Balthazar said. "A bit of advice - start with small, soft things that can't be broken if we drop them. Pillows, perhaps. We can move up from there. When you can hold a smooth glass without accidentally breaking it or having it slip out of your hand, you'll be back to having full use of your hand."

"This summer's gonna suck." Harry muttered, closing his eyes. "Alright, I'm gonna get some more sleep. Thinking about this is making my head hurt."

"Rest well, then." Dumbledore said.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** And so we begin what very well may be the final book of the R-Series. It's been a long journey to get to this point. And to be honest, I don't have it all planned out now. All of my plans were mainly for Citadel. But I've had a few plot bunnies pop up, so I have a good direction to take this book in. It's just a matter of getting there. As you can tell, this is probably going to be a long book. It wouldn't surprise me if I managed to surpass Citadel's word count. For those who found this and are confused by the events going on - and I always have some asking this with each book - this is book 7 of 7 (I think) in a series. You can find them all on my profile, so go start with Philosopher's Stone. Work your way through the first five as you would the canon ones, as the names follow. Citadel comes after that. Then you'll get back here.

And yes, you'll get to see the very start of the forging process. Eventually.

And not a word on Quesland, you hooligans. I hate Torchwood. But I couldn't resist. It was just too simple. Besides, I threw in a few Who references in past books. Why not another, ya know? Make the

universe a smaller place. This IS the kind of thing they'd love getting ahold of. A weird relic with so much destructive potential surely would interest them.

Anyway, welcome to book 7 and I hope you enjoy the ride! There's going to be a few big surprises to come, one of which no one will see coming. Maybe two. Or more. I haven't decided. The book will have its fair share of deaths. One of them has been written since book 1. And yes, I plan to do it in style. No, you don't get any hints as to who all is going to fail to make it to the end of the year.

Suffice to say that things are going to get interesting for awhile. The next chapter will deal with Harry coming to terms with having the Gauntlet on his hand along with the beginnings of what some might consider a descent back into madness, which will be further expanded upon in chapter 3. And I know everyone will enjoy chapter 3. If you read between the lines in this chapter, you might see what's coming. Guesses, anyone?

## Chapter 2 – Red Right Hand

Harry swore as he dropped to one knee. He hadn't expected to be so damned weak for this long. Whatever his body was doing, it certainly wasn't obeying his commands. He hated not having full control over himself. Clenching both hands into fists, he shakily stood back up, a determined look in his eyes.

"I will not be able to help you when you land. Are you sure you want to do this?" Dumbledore asked.

"I need to see them. They need to see me." Harry said, gritting his teeth. "I need to be there for Order meetings. I need to know what's happening. Tom Riddle has been silent for too long and I don't like what that might mean. There's been no anger, no glee, nothing. He's just been silent. I want to hear what's going on for myself."

"I have told you, not for the first time, that we can handle this. You need to concentrate on recovering." Dumbledore stated.

"And not for the first time, I've told *you* that I don't like being left in the dark." Harry growled, turning his head to send the headmaster a hate-filled glare. "And don't try to hide the fact that you're withholding information from me, because it's as clear as day that you are."

"Harry, there is nothing--"

"How do you know?!" Hissed Harry. "How do you know there's nothing I can do?! You haven't told me *anything* regarding the situation in Germany! What little I do know, I pieced together from the vague bit you said along with my own research! I've ascertained that Sergei Wagner is a lich of some sort. And one of some renown, if Voldemort has interest in him in any way! As to what Riddle is doing there and what this Wagner person is doing in retaliation, along with anything *our* side is doing is completely unknown to me! I've nearly died countless times for you, old man, so I expect to be treated on the same level as everyone *else*!"

"Harry, you *have*--" Dumbledore began. But once more, Harry cut him off.

"Finish that sentence and I'll remove Hogwarts from the face of the earth." Harry whispered, his eyes narrowing to slits. "I'm your little weapon and we both know it. And if you don't start treating me as an equal, I'll show you just what kind of force your little weapon can unleash. Let those words sink in well, Albus Dumbledore. Because I'm through taking orders. I'll do what I feel is best from this point on. You'd do well to ensure your goals are in line with my own. Because from this point forward, I'll stop at nothing to rid this planet of Tom Marvolo Riddle. And if that means crossing you, the Order, and the Ministry itself, then *so be it*."

Silence reigned in Dumbledore's office after that. Harry was the first to break the gaze, leaning over and panting quietly. He had to calm himself. There would be time for proper retribution later, after he had fully recovered and could tap into the Gauntlet's power. But in his time asleep, he had been thinking about his place in the world. And his place seemed to be drifting further and further from the place where Dumbledore seemed content to reside in. The burning hatred of his darker half seemed to be his true feelings, if his current mood was any indication. If things were left up to Dumbledore, they would wait for Voldemort until Doomsday itself rolled around. How many more innocent lives had to be snuffed out due to Albus Dumbledore wanting to play it safe?!

"Come, Harry. The quicker we arrive, the quicker you can rest." Said Dumbledore, his voice soft.

Harry bit back a seething reply. The headmaster must have thought his sudden mood swing was due to the Gauntlet and his recovery. It didn't matter. Grabbing a handful of Floo Powder, Harry stepped into the fireplace and muttered, "Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place." As he traveled, he closed his eyes. Dumbledore could believe what he wanted. Balthazar and he had been talking and the old ghost had given him the go ahead to tap into his power the moment he was strong enough to. There was one task that he had to get out of the way before any others. He had unfinished business that needed to be resolved. If it wasn't, he wouldn't be able to concentrate on Germany and whatever the hell was going on there.

Eyes snapping open, Harry twisted himself in time to prepare for the landing. He hit the ground and let himself crash got onto his left side. Sucking in a sharp breath, he rolled onto his back and glared up at the ceiling. He had spared his knees injury, but his arm was going to be sore for awhile. Most powerful wizard in the whole of Britain and he couldn't even land from a simple thing like Floo travel.

His eyes flicked to the side as Dumbledore swept out of the flames. Naturally, *he* would be able to land. Dumbledore always made his entrances well. If it had been up to Harry, he would have just shifted and traveled to Number Twelve that way. As it was, Balthazar had told him it would be at least another twenty-four hours before the Gauntlet had cooled down fully. Only then would his magical reserves begin to refill. The up side, he had said, was that they would refill at a quick rate.

Dumbledore didn't know it yet, but Harry was going to overtake him. The Order would get nowhere if they depended on Albus Dumbledore. And if they refused to accept him as their new leader, he would have to go it by himself. Or, rather, by himself with his inner circle of friends. He knew there was no escaping them. He wouldn't try even if he wanted to. He wanted them close, where he could personally guard them. There would be no more deaths around him. Not anymore.

Getting to his feet, Harry swiveled his left arm around a bit until the aching had died out. And, without saying another word to Dumbledore, he left the room. Number Twelve was eerily quiet for it being around lunch time. Food didn't even sound good to Harry. Balthazar had told him it probably wasn't going to for a few days. Then he would need to eat twice what he normally did in order to help build his energy back up. It went against everything he had grown to know about recovering after long periods of rest, but he trusted the old ghost.

Slowly climbing the stairs, Harry made his way to his bedroom. Sanctuary. Somewhere away from Dumbledore. Hissing in Parseltongue, the door popped open. Smiling, Harry stepped in and closed the door behind himself, leaning against it. Only now would he let go of the exhaustion he was feeling. It was bad enough that he had to look weak in front of Dumbledore. He didn't want anyone else

to see. No one would see him weak ever again. He was going to throw Voldemort into some long-forgotten dimension and he was going to change the wizarding world for the better. The 'dark' races; the vampires, the werewolves, and their ilk... they wouldn't be persecuted anymore. There would be equally, come hell or high water, and he was going to see that nothing stood in his way to reach that goal.

Shambling across the room, Harry collapsed onto the bed, letting out a quiet groan.

"Are you alright?" Came Balthazar's voice, his gemstone pulsing gently as he spoke.

"I've been better. I'm surprised, you know." Harry muttered.

"About what?"

"My plans."

"I have no reason not to believe you, Harry. In my day, people like that were dealt with swiftly in a manner fitting their crime. I realize things have changed since then, but I see no reason why you shouldn't be able to put your own ghosts to rest." Balthazar said.

"And if they try to get in my way afterward? What then?" Asked Harry.

"We will cross that road if we come to it. Remember what we spoke about - try not to think so far ahead. It will only cloud your view of the present." Balthazar said. "Now get into bed properly. We won't quite be back to normal by nightfall, but it should be cooled down enough to be used."

Letting out a quiet sigh, Harry pushed himself back up and into bed. He was at an angle, but it would have to do. Grabbing for a pillow, he lifted his head long enough to tuck it under. With another sigh, he murmured, "I feel like I'm a hundred years old right now."

"Think of how you'll feel when you actually reach one hundred years of age." Balthazar said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"I'd rather not." Harry muttered, yawning the sentence out. "Okay, going to sleep now. Feel up for more talk?"

"Of course."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry was awakened some time later by the sound of knocking at his door. Groaning, he pushed himself out of bed and crossed the room. Pulling the door open, he saw a good number of his friends loitering out in the hall. Tonks was at the front of the pack, however, and quickly latched hold of Harry's left side as soon as she could.

"Careful, Nym." Harry murmured. "The Gauntlet's..."

"Hot. I know." Tonks said, glancing down at it. "Dumbledore told us."

"He seemed cranky." Malfoy commented. He was leaning back against the wall, eyes closed. "Care to fill us in, Potter?"

"...Oh, very well. Uncle Harry will indulge you in story time. Come on in, children." Harry said, rolling his eyes as he stepped back in. "Where are Hermione and Ginny?"

"Hermione's staying with her parents. Ginny's with the rest of her family." Said Luna.

"It's been pretty quiet with those twins not here." Pansy noted.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Harry gave a recount of the forging process. Once he and the headmaster had gotten to the school, he had been lead up to the man's quarters. A slew of people were there waiting for them. And from there...

"Pain. A lot of pain." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "Balthazar says I nearly died. I don't remember any of it. I'd say I blacked out from the pain, but apparently I was screaming for a long time."

"He held up amazingly well." Balthazar said, causing everyone to glance down at his gem. "But it was dangerously close for awhile."

"As soon as you get better, I'm punching you." Tonks pouted. "Even knowing you'd probably vanish like that, I was scared..."

"I'm sorry, Nym." Harry said, leaning over to kiss the girl's cheek. "No choice in the matter, though. Dumbledore and his bloody sense of secrecy..."

"Which brings us back to Draco's question - what'd you do to piss the old man off, Harry?" Asked Pansy.

"I told him, in no uncertain terms, that if he didn't get off his butt and start bringing the fight to Voldemort, I'd leave him behind and go it alone." Harry said. "I'm sick and tired of waiting. If it were up to Dumbledore, we'd wait forever while Voldemort built up another army to jump us with. Something's going on in Germany and dammit all, I want to know what. I'll be crashing the first Order meeting I catch wind of. I want you all to be there. I'm the weapon that's going to bring this bloody war to an end and I want all of you there with me. It's time I stopped blindly listening to him. It's long become clear that he isn't fit to lead anyone, much less a group dedicated to wiping Voldemort out. If you ask me, he isn't doing a very good job so far."

"You're going to abandon Hogwarts?" Luna asked.

"Not Hogwarts. Merely Dumbledore. Something hasn't been sitting right with me for awhile in regards to that man." Harry said, shaking his head slowly. "It arose quite a bit last year, after I went to meet Scrimgeour for the first time. My feelings haven't changed. But I can be a very convincing actor if the need arises. Dumbledore needs to step aside and let me take the helm. If I'm going to do anything, I need to know *everything* that's going on. If Voldemort takes a piss in the bloody woods, I want to know about it. I can't be continually left in the dark and expect to function when and how he wishes! I'm through being a pawn. The white king out there is going to submit or I might just up and vanish on him one day. I'll carve my own way to victory from now on. Now that I have the power..."

Harry held up his right arm, flexing his fingers slowly. "...Now that I have this, I have no reason to put up with Albus Dumbledore."

"You're sexy when you're rebellious." Commented Pansy.

"Oi oi..." Harry said, giving the girl the evil eye.

Tonks bit back a giggle suddenly.

Harry gave a quick glance to Luna, who was biting back a laugh. He then looked to Malfoy, who looked vaguely disgusted. "...Good. Nice to know the two of you aren't going to spontaneously fawn over my apparent sexiness as well." He muttered dryly.

"The day I fawn over anyone, let alone you, is the day I loose the Killing Curse on myself." Malfoy stated.

Clearing his throat, Harry got back up and began to pace. "The trouble... is that everyone trusts Dumbledore quite a lot. Unfortunately, their trust is misplaced. I doubt I'll be able to show them the error of their ways at this point. However..." He paused then, eyes narrowing. "...No television, but... I know there's a wizarding radio station. How many families in the wizarding world do you think have radios?"

"Quite a lot." Tonks said, tilting her head. "I mean, those of us who still don't like to mingle with Muggle technology don't have a whole lot else to listen to, you know?"

"What the hell are you planning?" Asked Malfoy, smirking.

"I plan to make everyone see things my way." Harry said, returning the smirk. "After all... what choice do they have? I literally hold their salvation in my right hand. They can do as I say or they can fall victim."

"Are you sure that thing's power hasn't gone to your head?" Pansy asked. "You sound different."

"If I do, it's due to simply being able to gather my thoughts after a year of having them split apart. I owe the wizarding world nothing, Pansy. Not a damn thing. And yet I'm still expected to save them from Voldemort. When I kill him, it'll be for my own reasons. Not because of them. I'll avenge those killed and I'll show the wizarding world the error of their ways. I won't let something like Lord Voldemort happen again. I've become a living weapon to stop him. I'll do whatever it takes, no matter the cost. But I won't let the wizarding world think I

did it for *them*." Harry explained. "Nym found me. She saved me from hell. Dumbledore *sent* me to it. I think I've followed his commands for the last time."

"Wherever you go, we'll follow." Luna said, smiling faintly.

"And for that, I'm grateful." Harry said, inclining his head. "I suppose I'm getting ahead of myself right now, though. There are a few things I need to get done before I steal command of our side out from under Dumbledore."

"Like what?" Asked Tonks.

"Wrapping up loose ends." Harry said. "You'll see, in time. For now, since I'm good and awake and all... what say we head downstairs? I could use some food. I'm surprised that tottering old wench isn't around. Why *are* the Weasleys at home? Hermione I can understand, as her parents don't take well to magical travel. But them?"

"Mrs. Weasley is stubborn." Tonks said. As Harry started to leave the room, she and the others followed. "She thinks the war is finally going to explode and she wants to have 'one last nice summer together as a family' or something."

"Fool." Harry breathed. "Separating yourself from the pack makes you an easy target."

"And yet that's exactly what you plan to do." Malfoy commented.

"Yes, but I have the power to pick off anyone who gets in my way. She, on the other hand, would be hardpressed to kill a gnome." Harry stated. "...Hm. Balthazar, what's going on? I'm feeling a bit more... normal. When did the dizziness wear off and why didn't I notice?"

"When you were resting. I finally managed to patch up a troublesome area. It was the last one, as well. The Gauntlet's cooldown will accelerate now, Harry. It should be good to use by tomorrow morning at the latest. Possibly tonight if you don't get worked up. The less stress you put on yourself at the moment, the faster things will go. So if something starts to get under your skin, try to block it out. Understand?" Balthazar said.

"Understood." Harry said. "My emotions can stay on lockdown like they used to until this is over. That doesn't take much doing. Let me know when I can let it go, though."

"Understood." Echoed Balthazar.

**oOoOoOoOoOoOo**

During dinner that night, Harry suddenly let out a sharp hiss of pain.

"What's wrong?" Tonks asked.

"Gauntlet." Harry growled. "Balthazar, what the hell's going on?"

"Cooldown is finishing." Balthazar said. "Bear through the pain. What remains of your skin is being integrated and the Philosopher's Stone has finally begun to interact with your blood directly. It will be over in five minutes, but you may feel pain spikes."

"Fantastic." Muttered Harry, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. "At least I'll be able to use it now."

"Indeed." Said Balthazar. "We can start training whenever you'd like, Harry. Would you care to go through with your plans tonight?"

"This weekend." Harry murmured. "I want there to be a full house. If all goes well, I'll have one less thing to have to think about."

"Would either of you care to make a bit of sense?" Asked Lupin, who was sitting toward the far end of the table. "What training did you have in mind, Harry?"

"I was able to get my magical skills back up to basic levels at the end of last year. Balthazar and the Gauntlet should have regulated everything else back into place by now. If you hear any explosions coming from my room, don't worry too much. Unless I blow a hole in the floor or something." Harry explained. Mentally, he began to quickly shackle the truth behind his plans up. Dumbledore was present and the last thing he needed was to make an enemy of the headmaster before he could execute all of his plans. "Balthazar's told me that things *should* be under full control, but just to be safe..."

"Energy been doing alright?" Lupin asked. "It's been awhile since I had a chance to ask."

"I've been fine, considering. I have bouts of weakness here and there," Harry said, glancing over. "But on the whole, I'm doing alrig-- **OW!** Shit!"

"Language." Commented Dumbledore, dryly.

"Lessee you mind your language when it feels like fifty red-hot needles are driving their way through your fingers!" Harry snapped, glaring up at the headmaster.

Tonks and Malfoy, who were sitting nearest Harry, frowned. The corners of his eyes had seemed to turn a different color for a brief moment. The two glanced at one another. Malfoy shook his head slightly before motioning with his eyes back at Harry. Tonks gave a little nod. She would ask Harry about this later and fill everyone else in. Something was definitely happening to Harry. He had been a bit colder ever since merging with his other half, but he was getting random spats of anger now that had rarely been there before.

"I can contact Severus or Poppy if you would like something to help deaden the pain, Harry." Said Dumbledore, ignoring the boy's outburst.

"I've survived worse pain than this." Harry responded, venom still in his eyes. Mentally, he had raised every barrier he could. And it was a good thing, as he was staring straight at the headmaster, daring Dumbledore to try and read him. Sure enough, he felt a faint intrusion not long after. He repelled it with every ounce of force he could throw behind it. To his credit, Dumbledore looked surprised for a split second. Harry merely smiled at him, his glare fading away. "I'll survive worse in the future."

"Very well." Said Dumbledore, returning the smile as he turned back to his meal. "But if you change your mind, I am always here if you need something."

'Yes,' Harry thought, picking his fork back up and stabbing a piece of broccoli with it. '*Which is why I'M having to tie up the loose ends.*

*We'll see how you like being outmaneuvered, old man. You can't break into my mind anymore and you can't stop me from what I plan to do. On that note...*'

"Nym, did Hedwig ever return with a reply?" He asked, glancing over at Tonks.

"Hm? Oh! Yeah, she did. I was gonna tell ya after dinner, though. Figured you might wanna talk about it in private." Tonks said.

"Reply?" Asked Dumbledore.

'*Gotcha.*' Harry thought, mentally laughing. "Yeah, I decided to give an interview to WWN. I figured it'd be good for someone like me, who people seem to see as helping lead the charge against Voldemort, to let everyone know my feelings on things."

"Are you sure that is a wise idea? It is a very dangerous time to be doing things like that, Harry." Said Dumbledore.

'*In other words, you don't want to lose your vice-like grip on me.*' Harry thought. Shrugging, he replied, "Maybe. But hiding will get me nowhere. I won't be seen as some emotionless weapon merely being used as a means to an end. I've thought about what I want to say and I've told them as much. Nym, did you read it yet, or not?"

"Yeah, I glanced at it, just to see what they had to say." Tonks said. "We're good for this weekend if we can find someone to take us there."

"I can take you." Andromeda chimed in. She was sitting next to Lupin, of course. "Remus and I were going to head into London on Saturday anyway. I've decided to finally make him get some more presentable robes."

"My robes are fine." Mumbled Lupin.

"Sirius would swat me if he saw you still dressed like this after all this time." Stated Andromeda, fixing Lupin with a look. "And you're getting your hair turned into something a bit less shaggy."

"Yes, mother." Lupin said, raising an eyebrow. He was promptly smacked on the arm. "Ouch!"

"Walked into that one, Moony." Harry said, grinning.

"Yes, I suppose I did." Lupin said, rubbing his sore arm. Looking at Tonks, he asked, "Does she hit as hard as Andi?"

"Harder, probably. Let's never have a contest to find the answer to this question." Harry said.

"Sounds good to me." Lupin agreed, nodding sagely.

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore asked, "Are you certain this is a good idea?"

"Positive. If I went to the Prophet, they'd twist my words. I know most wizarding households have a radio. I'm just hoping enough are listening this weekend. I want to get a few things out in the open; a few things I need to clear up." Harry said. He then jumped as another series of stabbing pains flew up his lower arm. "Ffff..."

"That should be all." Commented Balthazar. "Look."

Harry scooted back in his chair and lifted the Gauntlet up. The burning red color was starting to fade into a beautiful gold. He gave it a minute, then carefully touched his goblet. When it didn't spontaneously burst into flames or begin melting, he tried to grab hold of it normally. It felt weird trying to move his fingers. The merging of flesh and metal left it feeling almost as though it wasn't really his own arm he was controlling. The biggest problem he had, and one that Balthazar had told him would eventually pass, was the fact that he had no sense of touch with the Gauntlet on. Balthazar had said that it wouldn't take long after the cooldown had finished before it returned, though. So Harry tried not to worry about it too much.

Applying what he thought was enough pressure, he went to pick the goblet up. It began to slip, however, so he put a bit more force into it. It went still in his hands and he smiled faintly. This was... odd. Not impossible to work out, just very odd. Very slowly, he brought the

goblet up to his mouth and got a drink. After setting it down, he commented, "New hand. That's weird."

"How does it feel?" Asked Luna.

"Alien." Harry replied. "I don't have any feeling in it yet."

"It will most likely return by the end of the weekend." Balthazar said.

"Looks like this weekend's going to be a big turning point, then." Harry commented, biting back a vicious smirk. "Always nice to actually looking forward to something in the future rather than dreading it."

"Just gotta be careful when you use the toilet until then." Pansy said, her voice dry.

Malfoy let out a highly undignified snort at that, quickly turning his head to excuse himself.

"Oi oi." Harry said, looking over at the Slytherins.

"Too easy a shot to take, Harry." Smiled Pansy.

"Quiet, you." Harry said.

Pansy snickered, causing Harry to let out an exasperated sigh. "ANYWAY," He continued, "If we have a few radios in the house, I want everyone present to be listening. Oughta be fun. Anything you lot want me to pass on?"

"Merely that we are doing everything we can to bring Voldemort's reign to another end. Hopefully one a bit more final than the last." Dumbledore said.

*'Except you aren't doing anything.'* Harry thought, nodding at Dumbledore. "Yeah, that'll be my general overview of the situation. I'm hoping the hosts don't go into anything personal. I'd rather keep this as business-oriented as possible."

"I'll make sure everyone's listening." Tonks said. "I'll also make sure to send a letter to Ginny so she can make her family flip the radio on."

"Think Hermione's the type to have a radio to pick up WWN?" Harry asked.

"Entirely possible. I can write her, too, just in case. I'm sure if she doesn't have one yet, she will by this weekend." Tonks said.

"Sounds about right. Okay, folks. I've been waiting for this thing to cool down so I can get started re-learning things. Think I'm gonna go get started on that." Harry said, getting up. "Plus I need to go over any potentially dangerous or embarrassing questions I might get asked on Saturday..."

"Want an audience?" Asked Tonks.

"Probably better not. At least not right away." Harry said. "Just in case I do blow something up, I don't want to risk anyone getting hit with debris. I'll come back out when I'm done, don't worry."

"*It's you.* The times I *am* worrying outnumber the times I'm *not.*" Tonks said, rolling her eyes.

"Yes yes, I'm a terrible boyfriend, I know." Harry said, ruffling Tonks' hair as he passed by, causing the girl to let out a squawk.

"Oi!" She cried, batting Harry's hand away. "Stoppit!"

"It's a good thing Fred and George aren't around tonight." Harry commented, pausing near the door. "I have a feeling they'd try anything to watch me test this thing out for the first time. Now there's a scary thought..."

Malfoy raised his goblet and, tonelessly, said, "Then let us all raise our glasses to the hope that they never try marketing lookalike Gauntlets that do stupid things."

"I'll drink to that." Lupin commented, making a face at the mere prospect.

Harry smirked as most around the table raised their glasses. Slipping out, he let out a quiet sigh. Dumbledore had tried a few more times to get into his mind when he assumed Harry wasn't paying attention. The headmaster, and everyone else listening to the Wizarding Wireless Network that weekend were going to be in for a surprise. Their precious little golden boy, who had fought so hard against the oppressive attitudes of a formerly-inept Ministry and a dark wizard out for his blood was going to rebel against the one man most saw as his savior.

Albus Dumbledore was no one's savior. Where had he been all those years when Harry was getting beaten by Vernon Dursley? Where had he been when Harry had to fight Quirrell, or the basilisk, or Voldemort himself in that graveyard? Dumbledore giving people second chances had been what led to the Dark Lord's revival and he would probably never admit it! If Moody had never been allowed at the school - if Dumbledore had been able to see that his 'old friend' was really a spy - Voldemort might have never been raised. Instead, Dumbledore had blindly put trust into yet another person that he shouldn't have. And he had learned nothing from it.

Climbing the stairs, Harry murmured, "Sunday night, we attack."

"Do you think we will be able to get to the level we need to be by then?" Asked Balthazar. "It *will* be quite a strain on you at this point."

"I'll manage." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "Someone has to teach that son of a bitch a lesson. It was a mistake to ever cause me harm."

"Very well. But if things get unstable, I'll shut the test down." Balthazar said. "We'll just have to try again at a later date."

"We'll get it done." Harry said. "From everything you've told me, it really won't be too hard to maintain it. It's just the initial bit that could give us trouble."

"Indeed. Very well. We will aim for Sunday night. Are you planning to reveal what we've done later in the week?" Asked Balthazar.

"If it's brought up. I'm going to wait to see Dumbledore's reaction to it before saying anything. If he doesn't say anything, it's just one more

thing he's hiding from me. And after Saturday, everyone will know he's done that a lot anyway. Catching him doing it after the interview will be hilarious." Harry said, opening the door to his room and slipping in. "Well then... shall we?"

"Let's."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** Ah, a bit more manageable a size this time! I hope everyone's enjoying book 7 so far! It's going to be a pretty wild ride from here to the end. As you can see, Harry's attitude has finally started to level out. It began at the end of Citadel and is continuing strong here.

Anyone care to guess what's being planned for next chapter?

I've wanted to write it for ages now. Gonna feel good to finally get it out of my system! It's gonna be a fun one, kids. I'll seeya then!

## Chapter 3 – Tempting Fate

"Hey, Harry. Thanks again for agreeing to this!" Said a man in his early thirties. He was wearing a bright orange set of robes and had equally obnoxious hair to match. His name was Carmine Albright and he was one of the two hosts of the Wizarding Spotlight show on WWN. Their gimmick was bringing in some famous witch or wizard each week and sitting them down to conduct interviews.

His partner, Emily Harkinson, sat across the room. She was dressed like most sane people were, with only a small segment of orange-dyed hair to indicate she was Carmine's sidekick. When Harry had entered the surprisingly-small studio, she had merely waved. He had come alone, convincing Tonks to sit this one out. Andromeda had dropped him off, saying they'd be back by within the hour to wait for him to come out of the nondescript building that WWN was operating out of.

"No problem at all, Mr. Albright." Harry said, inclining his head slightly. "I certainly wasn't about to let the Daily Prophet interview me. Half the time, they're insinuating that I'll replace Voldemort after I take him out."

Harry noted with mild amusement that both hosts had flinched upon hearing the Dark Lord's name. He was trying to conceal his right arm, but he wasn't doing that great a job of it. His long, blue cloak kept it hidden from view well enough when he walked, but he was going to be sitting down soon. But, he supposed as he was led across the room, being told about the process that would soon take place, it was fine to be paranoid. He and Balthazar had spent a lot of time practicing various things and working out the kinks in the flow of Harry's magic. While he was sure he could hold his own in a fight, he really wasn't looking to find out if he was correct. A bit more downtime would be nice.

"Now then," Carmine said, motioning toward a chair, "Just sit down and put the headphones on. We'll be getting started in a few minutes, alright? Try and relax and this'll be over with before you know it!"

*'Reminds me of a less flamboyant Lockhart...' Harry thought, sitting and doing as he had been instructed. "I just hope everyone will be ready for what I have to say. I'll warn you again: I'm not going to behave like most would assume I do."*

"We'll see about that." Commented Emily, who was fiddling with some knobs and dials on the other side of the table that separated Harry from the hosts. "Get a little bit closer to the mic, would you?"

Harry nodded, leaning forward in the chair. His cloak pulled back, revealing the Gauntlet. He scowled slightly before sighing and leaning against his knees. "I guess the secret's out now, huh?"

"What the devil is that?" Asked Carmine, standing up from across the table to get a better look.

"Gonna have to wait for the interview to start to hear that." Harry said, smirking.

"Then let's get going. Em, you ready?" Carmine asked, looking over his shoulder.

"All go, chief." Emily said, giving Carmine the thumbs-up.

"Then let's get going." Carmine said, grinning. He sat back down and pushed a ridiculously large button. "And good afternoon once again, ladies and gentlemen. Carmine Albright and Emily Harkinson here once again bringing you another fine edition of Wizarding Spotlight! Tonight's surprise guest is someone who's been talked about quite a lot in the news of late. You might have even heard of him - his name is Harry Potter! Harry, say hello!"

"Hello, everyone." Harry said. It was a little odd to not see the audience he was addressing.

"Harry just arrived minutes ago, folks, and he's promised to sit down with us for an exclusive interview! And already, he's raised some interesting questions here in the studio. He seems to have some kind of contraption attached to his right arm. Harry, could you tell us what that's all about?" Asked Carmine.

"This..." Harry said, lifting his arm. "This is what's going to win this war. This is an old relic called the Gauntlet of the Magi. Some might know it as Melchior's Gauntlet. I've heard it has a few other names, but those are the two I'm most familiar with."

"I see. And what, exactly, does it *do*?" Asked Carmine.

"To answer that, I suppose I need to explain something else first. For many years now, I've had... a problem with my wild magic. It would act up for no reason, erupt out of me when I didn't want it to, and so on. Last year, after an accident of sorts, I gained some semblance of control over it, but it wasn't enough. This, however, has finally allowed me to gain full control over my wild magic. Essentially, it regulates how I control the amount of magic I have access to. Those who know of the things I've done since entering Hogwarts will probably attest to the fact that I can be a force to be reckoned with if brought to it..."

"Destroying the Forbidden Forest, for example?" Emily asked, glancing over.

"That was not exactly me. But to explain that would take longer than we have on this program. But yes, the power I can tap into now could probably make that look like child's play. I just need to learn how to channel it. I've only had this thing on my arm a short time, so I'm still getting back to the point I was before I fused with it." Harry explained.

"Fused with it?" Carmine repeated.

"Yes. This Gauntlet is a part of me now, just as my own flesh and bones are. It's essentially replaced my entire lower right arm. I can't remove it." Harry said, shrugging.

"So it'll be on there for the rest of your life? Why go that far?" Carmine asked, brow creased.

"Because I have to. Voldemort has to be stopped, no matter the cost. There are some around me who feel differently, however. And these people are ones who also shouldn't be trusted. As, in some ways, they're no better than Voldemort is." Harry said, leaning back in his chair slightly.

"What do you mean?"

"For years now," Harry began, tilting his head in thought. "I have essentially been raised as a weapon. Not a child, learning to love the world around him that he was experiencing for the first time. But a weapon, built from the ground up to accomplish one goal - stopping the Dark Lord should he ever return. And now that he has, I have no choice but to continue down that path."

"It's a well known fact that you were brought up by your Muggle relatives, kept hidden from the wizarding world until you received your letter from Hogwarts. Does the bitterness you seem to be harboring come from the fact that you never had the opportunity to grow up surrounded by magic? That, once introduced back into the world you came from, you seemed to encounter shades of You-Know-Who wherever you went?" Asked Carmine.

"It isn't so much that as it is *where* I grew up. If I had been sent to an orphanage, that would have been fine. I could have dealt with that. Instead, I was sent to stay with my mother's sister, her husband, and her son." Harry said, his voice growing cold.

"I take it things weren't alright there?"

"Unless you count years of physical and mental abuse 'alright,' then no. They weren't. I came to Hogwarts with many scars littered on my body already. The number's only grown since then. And not all of them were from incidents at school. Instead, they came from Vernon Dursley, my uncle. A man who Albus Dumbledore insisted I return to year after year." Harry said.

"Didn't Dumbledore know of the abuse going on, though?" Asked Emily.

"Oh, he knew. He just didn't care. You see, Albus Dumbledore only cares about one thing - himself." Harry said, his voice turning venomous for the first time. "He uses other people as pawns so he himself does not have to act. He forced me to return to that hell hole year after year, stating it was 'for the best' and insisting the blood wards that once protected their home would hide me from those who would seek to do me harm. Ignoring all the while the fact that I

regularly came back to school with healing wounds and suffering mental trauma."

"That's quite a statement, Harry." Carmine said, his voice becoming less exuberant as he spoke. "You're essentially saying that Albus Dumbledore, a man who almost everyone in wizarding Britain respects, is a selfish man."

"Essentially? I'll state it outright if you want. Dumbledore sends people on missions to get information on Voldemort and his Death Eaters, despite knowing how great the dangers are. And these poor people, these *sheep*, follow him unquestioningly. All for the sake of being close to the 'great' Albus Dumbledore. Let me tell you something about Albus Dumbledore, everyone. He left me to die more times than I can recall - though I will *try* - because of what *he* thought was the right thing to do. In my first year at Hogwarts - my first year in the wizarding world since I was a *baby*, mind you - I had to basically face off against Voldemort again. He was hitching a ride on one of the professors at the time--"

"Quirinus Quirrell, correct?" Said Carmine.

"Correct. Voldemort was possessing him - the man had a second face coming out of the back of his head. And Dumbledore didn't do anything. Are you telling me for a second that he wouldn't know? Professor Snape even knew! And Snape is Dumbledore's bloody *LAPDOG!*" Harry barked. "But instead, the headmaster mysteriously vanished from the school on supposed business, leaving me to hunt down Quirrell before he could steal the Philosopher's Stone that Hogwarts was inexplicably playing host to! Snape beat me to him, but he was knocked out quick enough. That left me to deal with a grown man - and one with my parents' murderer sticking out of the back of his damned head - after less than a year of learning magic!"

"But he did return in time to save you in the end, obviously." Emily stated.

"Depends on how you want to look at it. I was being choked out by Quirrell. I had a grip on him which, due to his playing host to Voldemort, was causing his skin to boil and burn under my fingers. When I woke up, I was in the hospital wing and Quirrell was at St.

Mungo's. Yeah, he arrived. Too late to do anything but essentially tip Quirrell over backwards, but he arrived." Harry said, crossing his arms.

"And after suffering through that, he made you return home to your abusive uncle?"

"Yes. Year after year, despite my pleading. Despite having a friend who lived mere blocks away who would allow me to stay with her during the summer. No, he *insisted* I return to the Dursleys. I stop a basilisk and keep Voldemort from being reborn and I'm punished. I free my wrongly-imprisoned godfather Sirius Black and help him escape and I'm punished. I get forced into the Triwizard Tournament and have to witness Voldemort's rebirth and I'm punished. I have to sit through Sirius being slaughtered in front of me and I'm punished. Dumbledore wanted to keep me right under his finger where he could keep an eye on me! He wanted me in a cage so he could control my every action!" Harry growled. "Albus Dumbledore is nothing more than a selfish, manipulative, pacifistic figurehead! If it were up to Albus Dumbledore, we would never win this war!"

"What do you mean?" Asked Carmine.

"Late during the last school year, I helped lead an assault on the Citadel of Azkaban. We had to do so to free one of the gemstones needed to reforge the Gauntlet." Harry explained. "After that, Voldemort and his remaining Death Eaters effectively relocated to Germany. And despite being the key to his war and being the only weapon our side has, Dumbledore refuses to tell me *anything* about what's going on! All I know is that Voldemort is dabbling with the undead in some manner and that a man named Sergei Wagner is involved. But despite my best efforts, I haven't found out anything on either. And I know Dumbledore is hiding information from me. Why, you might ask? So I don't go after him myself. Once I get full control over the Gauntlet, there really won't be anything to stop me. And Dumbledore wouldn't let that fly. He wants to helm the command of this war, just as he did the last one. *HE* wants the glory of 'winning' against Voldemort again."

"This is quite a surprise." Carmine said. "You certainly did warn us that you weren't going to act like most figured you would. But I must say, Harry - calling out Dumbledore like this is quite an accusation. You certainly have reason to if the reports of your abuse are true. But to say he's a mere glory-hog? Isn't that going too far?"

"Not at all." Harry said. "Currently, Dumbledore is essentially doing nothing. Small groups comprised of Aurors and others who wanted to be involved are being sent to Germany to watch over Voldemort. But nothing is being done to stop them. Nothing is being done to stymy his progress. If it were up to Albus Dumbledore, we wouldn't take on Voldemort until he returned to Britain with an army of the undead. I, on the other hand, want to strike *now*, when he's at his weakest. In a foreign land, dealing with things he has no great knowledge of. He lost a lot of his number at Azkaban, I saw to that. Can you think of one single, logical reason that he cannot mobilize our forces right now?"

"I know nothing about the inner workings of war planning, Harry. I'm afraid I'm a mere radio host. That being said, it probably has a lot to do with diplomacy. He doesn't want to start any trouble with Germany. Staging a war on their soil could be bad, you understand."

"And letting him desecrate their dead isn't bad?" Asked Harry. "Because that's exactly what he's doing, apparently. He's getting bodies over there and experimenting on them. All I know is that some form of necromancy is involved. Sad how little I know on the matter when I'm the one who has to stop anything he throws at us, huh? If we lose this war, let it be on Dumbledore's pointy head for not letting me be prepared. I wanted to come here today to clear the air on this matter. I refuse to be left out of the loop any longer. And I want to make one point very clear: If Albus Dumbledore continues to leave me in the dark; if he keeps trying to hide things from me, I'll walk out on him."

"You aren't saying you'll just abandon Britain, are you?" Asked Emily.

"Not at all. I'll just find my own way to Germany and hunt down Voldemort from there. I have a few things to go off of, after all." Harry said. Tapping his scar, he added, "I can see what he's doing through

my scar sometimes, if he's particularly happy or angry. Unfortunately, that means waiting for something to actually make him happy - which is a sign of great trouble - or for something to piss him off. And the latter might be worse than the former, depending on the situation."

"So you've basically come on to get this out to the country as a whole? Why do that? Why not confront him in private?" Carmine asked, frowning.

"Because this information had to get out there. I know there are stupid little lackeys out there who will always blindly follow their White King wherever he goes. They'll always think he's perfect and that his word must be obeyed. But I know the truth. Albus Dumbledore is a fallable human being like the rest of us and, in his old age, he's starting to make wrong decisions quite often. And in a situation like this, which requires action, he is sitting on his laurels and sending good men and women out to their deaths. All for the sake of his supposed *justice*. I want the wizarding world to know that he's flawed. I won't try to claim I'm perfect, but I'll assert that in this situation, I'd make a better leader than him. *He* hasn't had to face Voldemort like I have. *He* hasn't had to suffer the losses I have. *He* hasn't been forced to get beaten within an inch of life every year! **I have!** And it's about time I started getting the damn respect I'm owed. I won't be treated like I'm some kind of lunatic, vying for the next Dark Lord spot as soon as it opens. If I were to go bad, everyone would know it. There's a difference between anger and lunacy. It's a fine line that I've nearly fallen over several times. But there's one important difference - there's one thing that separates me from ever becoming like Voldemort."

"And that is?"

"My friends. As sappy as that may sound, it's true. Those around me have helped keep me sane; helped keep me grounded. When the world was falling apart around me, they helped put it into perspective. When Voldemort and nightmares were keeping me awake night after night, they helped me get sleep. When Sirius died, they helped pull me out of the funk I fell into. And if I decide to leave Dumbledore's side and end this war on my own, I know they'll be right there, going along with me. I learned a long time ago that it's hopeless to try and

do things on my own - they'd just catch up and come with me whether I thought I wanted them to or not. So I accepted that they had to be with me. I want them to be with me. I lost one of my closest friends a few months back during the raid on Azkaban. That's what cemented this drive in me - that's why I need to end this now. I can't watch any more of my friends laying lifeless on the ground in front of me. And if I have to turn my back on Albus Dumbledore and everyone in wizarding Britain who follows him to do that, then so be it."

Silence reigned in the studio for awhile after that. Harry had lost focus of the world around him, lost in his thoughts as he spoke. Carmine and Emily seemed to notice Harry zoning out and promptly regained control of the show.

"Well, Harry, our time's almost up. I want to thank you again for coming on the show to say your bit. Is there anything else you'd like to say?" Carmine asked.

"Just this: Think for yourselves, everyone. Think about where Dumbledore's 'leading' has gotten us. Think about how many of your friends, your family, your loved ones have died following his orders. Think about how many more will die if we continue to let him guide us. I won't even try to say I'm a leader. But I know what's important. And I know that I'm the only one who can stop Voldemort. I want to do it now, while he's weakened, instead of after he gets another army going. Is that so bad? Does wanting to end this war sooner than later, sparing countless lives, make me a bad person? Does the fact that I'll abandon Dumbledore to reach that goal make me a bad person? If so, then so be it. But I'm sick of watching people die all around me. And I'm tired of having to hide. It's time to end this war. And whether it's with him or not, that's exactly what I'm going to do." Harry said, his voice quiet.

"Thank you, Harry. And thank you, one and all, for listening. Join us next time when our special guest will be Ixiana Bellfort, famed herbologist and writer of the new book 'Sprouting Up Gold'! I'm Carmine Albright..."

"And I'm Emily Harkinson."

"And we'll see you next Saturday!"

A light overhead went out and Carmine slumped back in his chair, blowing out a long, low sigh. After awhile, he looked over at Harry. "We're going to get giant, cartoonish bags of mail over this. I can't imagine how many howlers we'll have to sit through hearing."

"Comes with the territory, huh?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. But I think this'll be a record." Carmine said, closing his eyes.

"I do apologize for that, as well as for using your show to get my own issues out there. But it couldn't be kept a private matter anymore. Dumbledore's controlled me far too long. And when the matter is something this big, it can't happen anymore. I need more freedom. I need to know what the hell is going on out there." Harry said.

"Do you really think you'll be able to stop You-Know-Who?" Asked Emily.

"I do." Harry said, nodding. "I know the exact way I'm going to get rid of him. I just need to find him and pray he doesn't have an army."

Getting to his feet with a weary groan, Carmine walked over and extended his hand. "It was quite an interview, Harry. Thanks. I'm sure we'll regret it when we have headaches bigger than the whole of Europe, but thanks."

Standing as well, Harry paused for a moment before raising his right hand to grasp Carmine's. With a quick shake, he smirked. "Headaches are something I'm well accustomed to. I'd hate to be in your shoes right now."

"I'd hate to be in them any time." Muttered Emily, who was messing with the controls to the device in front of her again. "Louder than a rock band."

"You're the one who thought orange was a good idea, if you'll recall." Commented Carmine.

"I said 'a bit' of it." Emily corrected.

"I think I'll make myself scarce before I have to dodge flying radio equipment." Harry said, moving towards the door. "Good luck with the mail, you guys."

But the two radio hosts were well into an argument with one another. Grinning, Harry slipped out. Once the door was closed behind him and he was alone in the hall, he sighed. He already had a headache. And it was going to get worse before it got better. Turning, he blew out a second sigh as he headed for the exit. Andromeda and Lupin should have been back by now, after all.

Rounding a corner, Harry's face was jerked to one side as something connected with the left side of it. He blinked a few times before his eyes slid to the left. There, looking quite angry, was Andromeda. Lupin was standing just behind her, wincing.

"Oh? Am I going to have to start already?" Harry asked quietly, bringing a hand up to rub his sore cheek. "Surely you didn't think me to be so foolish that I would continue to abide by Albus' silly rules, did you?"

"Everything he's done, he's done--" Andromeda began, but Harry interrupted her.

"Everything he's done, he's done to satiate his own appetite! No one was looking for me until after Voldemort was resurrected! And finding me wouldn't have been hard even if he had been! He wanted me under lock and key so he could keep his all-seeing eyes on me and control everything I did! It isn't happening anymore." Harry growled, glaring at Andromeda. "You can follow him to your death, but I thought *you*, of all people, had more sense than that. You've seen first hand what Vernon did to me. And yet you *still* think Albus is in the right?! How dare you think that!"

"Don't you raise your voice to me." Andromeda said, her voice lower in pitch, but just as fevered. "I've raised you like my own all these years. I've tended to your wounds. I've given you a place to go if you've needed it. My daughter's gotten into more life-threatening situations because of you than I care to remember! But if it wasn't for Albus keeping an eye on us, there's no telling if we would have been attacked by now or not! No matter what you think of him personally,

he's a strong figure of power for our side! Not many would dare raise their wands against him. He didn't deserve *that*, Harry."

"No, he deserves to be put through the same hell I've been through. Or worse." Harry said, grinning. "I'd kill him myself if I thought I could get away with it. But I'd rather not make myself a fugitive. Not when I have so much yet to do. More than any of you realise, I think. I won't apologize for what I said because it's all true. He's a manipulative bastard and he doesn't deserve to be ordering anyone around. But his time is nearly at an end. And when it arrives, I'm going to be there. And I'm not going to offer him any help. Because what help has he ever offered me?"

Harry slid his hands into his pockets and pushed past Andromeda. Lupin grabbed his arm before he could get by him as well, however.

"Where are you going?" He asked.

"Back to Number Twelve." Harry stated, keeping his eyes forward.

"You can't shift back." Lupin said. "Come on, Harry. Both of you need to calm down. At least until we get back to the house. It's safer there than it is here."

"Nowhere's safe anymore. Which is kinda the point, isn't it? For all his grandstanding, Albus Dumbledore hasn't made anywhere safe. Or have you forgotten Hogsmeade? How about *this* town? I hear they're still rebuilding the area we fought in. Don't you talk to me about safety, Moony. The Ministry was supposed to be safe as well, wasn't it? Why don't you ask Dumbledore how safe it really was!" Harry snapped, turning to look straight into Lupin's eyes. "Why don't you ask *Sirius* how safe it really was."

There was a loud **CRACK** then, and Harry was gone. Lupin hadn't even seen the Armor encase him. Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the wall. "Damn it... we can't be doing this. Not now..." Glancing over at Andromeda, he sighed. "Well, are you happy now? This is exactly what I said would happen if you did this. So do I get to say 'I told you so' or would that be taking it too far, Andi?"

"And what would *you* have me do, Remus?" Asked Andromeda. "Coddle him like everyone else does? He can't go around talking about Albus like that."

"He can, in fact, do so. He'll be of age soon enough. I daresay he's been through more than enough to state that he's been 'of age' for a good while now. He may have to sit back and wait, but if we don't get him calmed before the 31st, he's going to vanish on us. And without him around, morale is going to drop, even *with* that little speech of his fresh in the minds of everyone." Lupin said. "Like it or not, he just told the whole of wizarding Britain that if Dumbledore wasn't going to do anything to kill Voldemort, *he* would. And that doesn't paint a very good picture of Albus. I respect Albus as much as anyone, Andi. You know that. But don't act like he hasn't been at fault. Don't act for a minute as though he hasn't done anything wrong as far as Harry's concerned."

"So you're siding with Harry? Is that what I'm hearing?" Asked Andromeda.

"I'm siding with no one. I could sit around pointing fingers all night." Lupin said, squeezing his eyes shut and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "But it won't get anything done. Now come on. We need to get back and run damage control. Who knows what we're going to go back and walk in on..."

"...Fine. But we're not done talking about this." Andromeda said.

"Of course." Lupin muttered as Andromeda passed by. With a tired look in his eyes, Lupin pushed himself away from the wall and followed.

**oOoOoOoOoOo**

Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, quite possibly for the first time, was completely silent. The members of the house, as promised, had flipped on the wireless to catch the interview. And instead of something motivating, they were met with a bitter, rebellious speech. Harry's friends had gathered in the library to listen. And even knowing what was going to happen, it still left them quiet for various reasons.

As soon as the interview had ended, Malfoy had gotten up and left the room. He hadn't returned yet.

Suddenly, however, the air began to crackle. The girls who remained in the library looked around them for a moment, slowly drawing their wands. Another **CRACK** filled the air as Harry reappeared, travelling with some lingering downward force. He slammed into the ground and immediately dropped to one knee, panting heavily.

"Well, that was bloody stupid." Harry hissed.

"It was your idea, if you'll recall." Balthazar said.

"Yes, yes. It's all my fault. I didn't hear you warning me about anything!" Harry cried, glaring at the Gauntlet.

"How was I to know?" Balthazar countered. "We're being stared at. Just so you know."

Harry stood up and dusted himself off, scowling. "Well aware of that, thank you." He looked to Tonks and asked, "Well?"

"We haven't been out to see how the old folks are taking it. Malfoy went out just after the show ended, but he hasn't come back yet..." Tonks said, putting her wand away. "The hell are you doing shifting back?"

"Your mother decided to slap me and get into an argument at the WWN building. So I left them behind." Harry said, crossing his arms. "Apparently, despite all she's seen, she doesn't want to believe I'm right."

Tonks groaned. "Dammit, mum..."

"Fair warning, you might want to hole up in the bedroom for awhile." Harry said. "So... want to go tag along for my meeting with Albus?"

"Using his first name now?" Pansy asked, smirking as she lazily twirled her wand. "Cheeky of you, Harry. He isn't going to take well to that."

"To hell with what he thinks." Harry said. "He's had long enough to change his direction in life. I can't be held responsible anymore. Soon as my birthday rolls around, I need to get a flat somewhere or something. I've gotta get the hell outta this place."

"And you think they're just going to let you?" Asked Luna, tilting her head. "Surely they'd come after you, Harry. And it *would* be quite dangerous living alone."

"I'm assuming I'll have Nym there with me." Harry said, looking at Tonks, who nodded. "Jolly good! I won't be alone, see? And besides, anyone who tries attacking me at this point is an idiot. If you think I wouldn't ward the place to the nines, you're insane. I've learned a thing or two about wards in the years since re-entering the wizarding world. I'll be fine."

"If you say so." Luna said. "Well... I suppose it would be best to get this over with. Then we can all have some aspirin and retire for the day."

"I like the way you think." Harry said, grinning. "Alright, let's go, you three. I wanna pick up Draco before we head into the kitchen."

But, as it turned out, Malfoy was already in the kitchen. And, apparently, had been there since the end of the broadcast. As Harry and the girls approached, they heard the sounds of heated arguing coming from inside. Putting a finger to his lips as he looked over his shoulder, Harry grinned and shifted quietly, his Armor barely getting a chance to light the area.

--keep saying that, but where's the proof?!" Malfoy yelled. He was standing near Dumbledore, who was also on his feet. Snape was keeping Malfoy held back.

"And I have explained that to you as well." Dumbledore said, his tone even. "If you wish to think that continuing to ask will get you a better answer, you may do so. However, I would not hold out hope."

"It's a wonder he hasn't already broken ties to you." Malfoy said, voice growing icy. "With all the shit you've put him through, it's a miracle you're even alive."

"Harry would not attack me." Dumbledore stated.

Smirking, Harry dropped from the current he had been gliding along. As he shifted back in behind the headmaster, he drew his wands. And, before anyone could react, he had one poking into the front of Dumbledore's neck while the other rested firmly against the headmaster's left temple. "Are you sure of that, Albus?" He whispered silkily. "Are you really?"

"Welcome back, Potter." Malfoy commented, smirking. "Have a good day out?"

"Fantastic." Harry replied, returning the smirk. Pulling his wands away from Dumbledore, he twirled them a bit before tucking them away again. One in his back right pocket, one up his left sleeve. His own wand was always in his pocket. "So, you vanished on the girls, Draco. We wondered why."

"Draco had to get a few things off of his chest." Commented Snape, who looked none too happy to see Harry.

"Lovely. You'll have to tell us later." Harry said. Walking back over to the door, he opened it and smiled at the girls. "Right then. Everyone's assembled. So - what did you think of the show?"

"I think it was unwise to do that, Harry." Stated Dumbledore.

Malfoy snorted and repeated the headmaster's words in a mocking tone before looking to Harry and saying, "He was beet red when I busted in. I think the only thing keeping him from conjuring and subsequently kicking a puppy was the fact that he was surrounded by other people."

"Good. It'll give him something to stew on for awhile." Harry said, leveling his gaze at Dumbledore. "And you'd *better* stew on it. My birthday approaches. You can't chain me down at this point. So you'd better try your damnedest to work with me. *With* me, not over me. You aren't going to hide anything about Voldemort from me from this point forward, no matter how trivial a matter it may seem to you. I hope that's as clear as crystal because I'm only saying it once. If you

haven't decided to stop sheltering me from what's going on by the end of the month, I'll go find Riddle myself."

"You cannot do that, Harry." Stated Dumbledore who, for his part, was doing a fine job at acting as though nothing was bothering him. "It is too dangerous for you to be going out by yourself. I only allowed you out today because Andromeda and Remus would take you. I see you have found your own way back, however."

"You 'allowed' me, huh? I got news for you, Albus, I would've shifted there if I had had to. I'm not your pawn anymore. So I suggest you stop treating me as such. As for the danger... what danger do you think I'm incapable of facing by myself?" Harry asked, gesturing vaguely to one side. "Do I need to give you a showing of my power? Very well. I'll think of something. And then, let's say tomorrow, during dinner... I'll perform something. And if you still think I'm incapable of taking care of myself, I may back down."

"And if I believe you *to be* capable, I am to simply begin telling you all I know of Voldemort's movements?" Asked Dumbledore. The headmaster took a deep breath before inclining his head slightly. "Very well. But if I do not believe you capable, I want you to apologize for what you have done today. Do you understand?"

"I'm not a child, Albus." Harry stated. "And I think it's about time I proved that to you."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

To most, it had been a quiet Sunday. The sounds of a few children playing could be heard coming from the nearby playground, occasionally a dog would bark, but for the most part, it had been quiet. The temperature had been pleasant enough, with a faint wind helping to keep the sun from being too overbearing. Every so often, someone would leave their house and ponder working on their gardens or flowerbeds. But the draw of the air conditioning would always bring them back in. As night crept up on Privet Drive, something came with it.

It kept itself hidden from everyone, standing in the middle of the road at one end. It was made invisible and stood stock still for hours on

end. But when the faint chimes of a church bell sounded midnight, it began to move. Were anyone awake and looking outside, they would have seen something very peculiar stalking up the street.

It stood around six feet tall, give or take. Shining a brilliant white, it cut through the darkness like a sword, giving off an aura of sorts as it walked. It wore what appeared to be white robes with a hood up to hide its face. A face which, currently, was veiled in absolute darkness save for two glowing, red orbs that constituted eyes. Its robes, however, were tattered in an odd way, as though it had to fight through an army just to reach Privet Drive. The collar was especially torn up, leaving strips of fabric to flap in the wind.

The creature, because whatever it was clearly wasn't human, seemed very intent on one house on the street. As it got closer, its pace picked up. And, as it stood before the front door of Number Four, it brought a hand up. Reaching out and touching the door, it breathed out a small cloud of red mist, which travelled upward slightly before vanishing.

"I'm home, Uncle." It said, its voice echoing faintly in the silence of the night. And, without another word, it shifted to the other side of the door.

The house was silent, but the creature knew something was off the moment it had entered. Things seemed too... clean. And, as it glided into the living room, the answers to a few questions fell into place. The mantle over the fireplace still held pictures, just as it had done in years past, but these were different. These... were new. Reaching out, the creature picked up one of them, its hand unsteady.

Eyes narrowing from beneath the hood, it roughly set the picture back down and, anger coursing through it, turned to head toward the stairs. And, as it walked up them, it shifted again. This complicated matters. He hadn't expected to meet resistance of any kind. And if Vernon Dursley still lived alone, he wouldn't have hit any. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. He had apparently remarried in the year since Petunia and Dudley had been murdered. His new wife was far prettier than Petunia, leading the creature to wonder how the hell Vernon had

snagged her. Adding to this was the fact that she, too, had a child. A boy that looked a few years younger than Dudley should have been.

Heading toward an all too familiar bedroom, the creature passed seemlessly through it. The furniture in the room seemed new, and it was arranged quite differently now. And there, sleeping in the bed, was the boy.

This wouldn't do. It needed to get rid of the idiots standing between it and Vernon Dursley. It shouldn't be too hard, it reasoned. Children were, after all, scared of the silliest things.

Shifting back in, the creature walked to the edge of the bed, looming over the sandy-haired boy sleeping in it. And, in one swift motion, its hand had shot out, grabbing the boy roughly by the throat. This solved two problems at once; waking the boy and ensuring that he wouldn't scream upon being ripped from his dreams.

*"Boo."* Hissed the creature, red mist once more seeping from its mouth.

The boy looked up at the creature through wide, horrified eyes. He tried to cry out, but with the creature's hand on his throat, the only thing that escaped was a gurgling whimper.

"I'm not here to harm you." The creature stated. "I suggest you don't look out into the back yard when morning comes."

Shortly after, the boy's eyes rolled up and he passed out. As soon as this happened, the creature immediately let go. Straightening up, it stared down at the boy for a moment before shifting and entering the second floor hallway again. The boy had been conscious enough to hear its warning. The creature really didn't care if the boy heeded it or not. If he didn't, there would be years of psychological damage done, to be sure. But it was of no concern to the creature. It only had business with Vernon Dursley. It didn't care what these replacements saw or did after it finished its goal. This had been a long time coming and nothing was going to stop it. And if a few innocents had to be traumatized after not listening to instructions, it was their own fault.

The creature paused outside the door to the master bedroom, hands clenching into fists briefly. Shifting through the door, it walked over to the large bed. Two people were sleeping soundly in it, as though a war wasn't going on in the world around them. The woman was thin and pretty. It wouldn't have been surprising if she turned out to be a model. It still raised the question of how Vernon had gotten her. But the creature's curiosity wasn't that great. It really didn't care.

Once again, it shifted in and hovered beside the bed for a moment before reaching out and gripping its target's throat. And, just as it had done with the boy, the creature did with the woman: it issued a warning before depriving enough oxygen to cause her to pass out. And though she had struggled quite fervently against it, she hadn't been able to wake Vernon up. Not surprising, as the man had shown himself capable of sleeping through ridiculous levels of noise in the past.

Walking around to Vernon's side of the bed, the creature stood there for awhile, watching the man sleep. He had gotten even fatter, somehow, in the time since they had last met. How the bed even supported Vernon's weight was confounding.

A dark grin split the creature's shadowed face as it brought its right hand up. Slowly, the fingers on his hand twisted and pointed until they were like claws. Then, a single finger outstretched, the creature brought its hand down to Vernon's forehead. It pushed gently, driving the tip of its clawed finger into Vernon's skin. The man woke up with a yelp, and quickly froze at the sight of the thing beside his bed. In that instant, the creature's grin grew and he quickly raked its finger down the center of Vernon's face. Vernon howled in pain and clutched his face, thrashing about in bed. And, through the wails of the man, the creature bowed low.

"Hello, Vernon."

"W-what are you?!" Vernon yelled, yanking one of the pillowcases off of his pillows and using that to mop the blood from his face.

"Don't you recognize your own nephew?" Asked the creature, looking at its bloodied finger in amusement. "Or was that erased with the rest of your memories?"

Vernon froze in the middle of wiping his forehead. Eyes wide, he looked back up at the creature. "Y-you...?"

"I'm surprised you remarried so soon, you know." Continued the creature in a conversational tone. "I don't appreciate it."

"It's my life!" Vernon snarled. "I'll do what I want with it! Anything to replace those... those wizard-loving traitors!"

The words had barely left Vernon's mouth when the creature shot a hand out, dragged Vernon out of bed, and slammed his head, face-first, into the wall. As Vernon collapsed to the ground and once again let out a wail of pain, the creature dropped into a crouch, drawing back its hood. The light that was encasing the rest of its body looked cracked and distorted around its head. Its red eyes narrowed to slits as it hissed, "Don't you dare insult them in front of me, you son of a bitch. Don't you **dare** speak of them that way! They were better humans than you'll ever be! They didn't deserve the fate they got!"

"It was you who brought it about!" Roared Vernon. "I did what I had to!"

"You remarried in under a year, you fat bastard!" Screamed the creature, its voice reverberating as it stood back up and kicked Vernon hard in the back. "You don't give a damn about anyone but yourself! You've *never* given a damn about anyone but yourself! You've made a life around making people miserable!" Its voice dropped to a low growl then as it finished, "And I think it's time for you to suffer for once."

"You'll never get away with it, whatever you're planning!" Vernon spat, backing up and slowly getting to his feet. "They'll lock you up if you kill me!"

"They'll never know it was me." Grinned the creature. "That's the beauty of it. Some might have suspicions... but they'll never be able to firmly place me here. Because the truth of the matter is... I'm *not* here."

"What the hell does that mean?!"

"Why should I answer? Planning to let them know when they come for you? You won't be in any condition to speak." The creature purred. "For every injury you gave me, I'll return tenfold. For every day of torment you provided me, I'll dig a mark into your flesh. I've warned these poor, stupid people living with you not to look out back come morning. Would you like to know why? Do you want to know what they'd see if they do?"

Vernon didn't answer, instead grabbing at the lamp on the nightstand and chucking at the creature, who simply sidestepped. Smirking, the creature took a step forward, the fingers on its other hands twisting into points. "You're going to beg for me to stop. You're going to scream for me to stop. You're going to apologize for every single thing you've ever done to me."

"And that will satisfy you, eh?" Vernon asked, glaring at the creature.

"No. Nothing short of killing you is going to satisfy me. So that's exactly what I'm going to do." The creature hissed softly, bringing its face just inches from Vernon's as more red mist escaped its mouth. "You'd better start praying to any god you believe in now. Because you're going to lose the ability to speak and think rationally in about one minute."

oOoOoOoOoOo

"So there George is, trying desperately to catch this poor, dumb kid who tried to steal one of the Bouncing Banana Berry Bogies, knocking over half the shelves in the store! And all I can do is stand there and laugh, because he's got the angriest look on his face ever. Anyway, he finally catches the kid and wrangles him through the door to the back room. I'm still out front trying to run damage control with the REST of the customers as he's working out a way to deflate the idiot in the back. Must've taken... what, about an hour?" Asked Fred, glancing across the dinner table.

"Something like that." Muttered George, who was blushing faintly.

"Yeah, about an hour later. We didn't fine the kid because looking back, it was too damn funny to!" Fred said.

"You didn't get 4-B vomited on *you*." George said, giving his twin the evil eye. "You wouldn't have thought it was so bloody hilarious if you had been getting hurled on."

"Can you two not discuss vomit at dinner?" Asked Pansy, who was rubbing at her temples.

"Yeah, tell us afterward or something." Tonks said, making a face. "That's gross, even for you two."

Harry just bit back a laugh as he picked at his dinner. The twins had dropped by a surprise visit, detailing a typical Monday afternoon at their store to their friends. People from the Order had been popping in and out through the entire meal. One time, Harry had noticed the headmaster, who was sitting at the far end of the table, go very still. That had to be the information. But that had been nearly fifteen minutes ago and Dumbledore had said nothing so far. He doubted that the man was going to. At least not in front of everyone.

Finally, Snape arrived, looking worn out. He handed Dumbledore a series of reports before collapsing into an empty chair.

"Busy night, Severus?" Asked Dumbledore.

"You have no idea." Snape said. "You do know the rumors going around, do you not?"

"I do." Dumbledore said, looking through the reports quickly. "And I believe it is not for us to discuss in polite company."

Harry closed his eyes and smiled, a different type of laugh trying to rise in his throat. He bit it back, however, and resumed poking at his food. People had been alternating cooking duties. And while he had offered to make tonight's meal, he had done so mainly to help provide himself with an alibi. It had taken a good part of the day to work on, with so many people potentially coming through. He hadn't wanted to shaft anyone a meal by being under-prepared.

"I think," Snape continued, ignoring Dumbledore's statement, "That it *should* be. Or do you really plan to let this go?"

"I think it is my decision to make as to when and where I bring it up, Severus." Dumbledore said, glancing over the top of his spectacles at Snape, who scowled and looked away.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, looking up finally.

"Nothing that concerns anyone here." Dumbledore said. "Severus has merely been pining for a break."

Snape looked incensed at this, but bit back any scathing replies he might have been working on.

"I see." Harry said. "Headmaster, if I may ask a question?"

"You may."

"Have they found Vernon?"

Dumbledore's eyes shot over to Harry, who was giving the headmaster a calculated smile. "I beg your pardon?"

Harry looked to Snape and, rather than answering Dumbledore, asked the Potions Master a question. "That *is* what you're speaking of, correct?"

"Correct." Snape stated.

"Severus!" Dumbledore snapped.

Harry laughed at this, setting his utensils down. "Ah, jolly good. Albus isn't wanting to say anything. What did we agree to? I would prove myself and you would acknowledge it. Or are you trying to say this doesn't count?"

"Anyone know what these three are going on about?" Asked George, who had been watching the back-and-forth in confusion. "Something happen to Harry's uncle?"

"No." Dumbledore said immediately.

And, at the exact same time, Snape replied with, "Yes." And, after glaring at Dumbledore for a moment, looked back to George and

continued, "He was found dead, laying in a sizeable pool of blood in his back yard. And all signs to Potter being the one that did it."

"Prove it, you greasy-haired idiot." Harry said in a lazy tone.

"Who else would do it?" Asked Snape. "We've been keeping an eye on Vernon Dursley since the attack on his house. And nothing out of the ordinary has happened. All of a sudden, he is found dead. And who else but you would have the reason for doing so?"

"I was here all of last night and all of today." Harry said, smiling at Snape and reveling in how annoyed the man was getting. "How would I get over to Privet Drive, kill him, and then get back? With all of the people here and apparently the people monitoring his house, you'd think *someone* would have noticed me there, huh?"

"We have reports of a white *thing* stalking about." Snape said, narrowing his eyes.

"Oh, a white thing. Well shit, I guess you have me there, Snivellus." Harry said, rolling his eyes.

"I'll ignore that this once." Snape said, looking for the world like he wanted to do anything but. "And don't try to act stupid, Potter. We all know what you look like when using the Patronus Armor."

"And yet you still have no way to put me at the scene, do you?" Asked Harry, steepling his fingers in front of himself as he leaned back. "As I said - I've been here. I was up late last night trying to beat Moony in chess again, I fell asleep in the library in the middle of a good book, and then I've been making food for dinner most of today. So tell me, Snape - when did I sneak away to kill him?"

"...I don't know." Said Snape through gritted teeth. "But you must admit, Potter - the evidence is rather damning."

"Indeed it is!" Harry said, grinning. "Too bad it can't be traced back to me, huh?"

"You asked if we 'found him,' Potter. Hence you had to have known what had transpired." Snape stated. "The way I see it, you can either

tell us how you killed him or we can wrench it out of you with Veritaserum. By all means, feel free to subject yourself to the latter."

"Harry." Dumbledore said, finally speaking up again. "I have been trying to figure out how to prove your innocence since I was told of what had happened. And I cannot, save the fact that you were, in fact, in this house at the time that Vernon Dursley was estimated to have been killed. But clearly you were aware of his death. Is this your 'test,' Harry? Killing your uncle in such a way that no evidence can be traced back to you?"

"*Secundus Tergum.*" Harry stated, closing his right eye.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's what I've dubbed it. *Secundus Tergum. Second Skin.*" Harry said, his voice quiet. "And yes. This was my proof to you, Albus. I eliminated the one thing remaining of my past that utterly deserved erasure. No one will miss him. Tell me, were the woman and boy alright?"

"I cannot believe you would murder him, Harry." Said Dumbledore, his tone disappointed. "I thought you were better than that." He let out a sigh before nodding. "They were quite fine. They seemed frightened that some kind of creature had choked them out after warning them to not look in the back yard when morning came."

"Good. I didn't really care about those replacements, but the less trauma spread around, the better." Harry said. "As for not believing me capable of it... why sound so disappointed, Albus? Do you think me to be some sort of saint? I'm a living weapon that's been forced to the brink of insanity more times than I'd care to remember. And given what Vernon Dursley has done to me in the past, I'd consider this more than justifiable. He deserved a far worse death than the one I granted him. I should have split his belly open and let him bleed out that way, desperately trying to put his insides back where they belonged."

"And you believe you're going to get away with this cold-blooded murder? What makes you think that's going to happen?" Snape asked.

Opening his right eye, which had a puddle of dark red substance moving about it, Harry replied, "You."

"Me? What about me?" Asked the Potions Master.

"You're allowed to murder to keep your place at Riddle's side." Harry said. "If you can kill the innocent to get by like the miserable lapdog you are, I should be allowed to kill a man who's tortured me for most of my life."

"That isn't the same and we both know it." Dumbledore stated, his voice taking on a dangerous tone. "What Severus does--"

"What 'Severus' does is kill for you." Harry said, closing his right eye again as the red substance started spreading throughout it. "The White King is asking that his Knight work for the Black King. How many Pawns has he taken so far? How many more will he have to before you're satisfied?"

"It was my decision to return to being a spy. I knew what that meant." Snape stated. "Do you think I *enjoy* what I must?"

"Do you think you're *needed*?" Asked Harry, grinning again. "You haven't been needed for a long time. But it was nice of Albus to let you think you are. So tell me, Snape - how many children have you cut down in front of their parents? How many parents have had to watch you kill their children? What's your personal body count up to these days?"

"Harry." Dumbledore said, warningly.

"Far more than I can ever make up for." Snape said, sneering at Harry. "What is your point, boy?"

"Don't you take that tone with me. I'll leave you worse than I left Vernon. Because unlike him, you don't deserve a single ounce of compassion. I spared Vernon a lengthy death because I knew Aunt Petunia wouldn't have wanted it to be prolonged. Right to the end, I believe she genuinely loved him. For what reasons will remain a mystery. But you? You're nothing more than a coward. You chose your side, then jumped ship after Voldemort attacked my parents.

And Albus, ever the softy, gave you a place to exist. He gave you a reason to be. And you became his obedient little lapdog, doing exactly as he says for fear of being abandoned somewhere." Harry murmured.

"Harry!" Dumbledore repeated, the tone of his voice finally matching the look in his eyes.

"Losing Lily was one of the hardest things that's ever happened to me!" Growled Snape. "That sorry excuse for a wizard that she married wasn't fit to wipe the mud from her boots! And you're just like he was... you only care about yourself and what best suits your own goals."

"It would be in your best interests to stop speaking ill of my father, Snape." Harry said.

"And it would be in *your* best interests to stop being a rebellious little twit who thinks he can get away with anything he wishes! James thought the same way. And look where that got him!" Snape said.

"Shut your filthy mouth." Harry hissed.

"What's wrong, Potter? Can't handle the truth about your father? How he was so stupid that he was killed because his own friend betrayed him?! How *he's* the reason Lily is dead?! Surely you can't think that worthless man deserves anything but--"

But Snape was cut off. A creature of light, much like the one that had attacked Vernon Dursley, had appeared beside the Potions Master, a clawed finger jabbing into the man's throat. As the headmaster got to his feet, Harry did as well, opening his right eye again as the red in it began spilling into the left one. "Not a very smart man, are you? Apologize and I might let you live. Or don't. I have no problems in ripping your throat out."

"Harry, let him go!" Demanded Dumbledore, drawing his wand.

"Don't you threaten me." Harry said, looking aside at the headmaster. "Or do you want to join Snape? I thought we agreed - you start telling

me everything or things would get complicated. Funny how you failed to mention Vernon on your own, huh?"

"Let him go." Dumbledore repeated, aiming at Harry.

"Why does no one ever ***LISTEN*?**!" Harry yelled. Four more creatures of light shifted in around Dumbledore. One grabbed his wand arm and jerked it upward. One had its claws at the headmaster's neck and one had its claws aimed for Dumbledore's heart. The last one plucked the wand out of Dumbledore's hand, tossing it over to Harry, who caught it and set it on the table in front of himself.

This action, of course, brought nearly everyone at the table into action. Most of the adults present were now aiming their wands at Harry, who made no motion to draw his own. Meanwhile, all of Harry's friends, along with the Weasley twins, were aiming back at those who were aiming at him.

"Look what being quiet gets you." Harry murmured. "In-fighting. Rebellion. Is this what you wanted, Albus?"

"Of course not." Dumbledore said, dimly aware of the claws digging into his skin. "But a part of me wanted to believe you were not willing to go this far. Does winning mean this much to you?"

"Winning no matter the cost. That's what I promised Leon. You're sitting idle while Voldemort does who-knows-what in Germany. How long do you plan to sit idle and wait for him to build another army, you doddering fool?! I know you want to be seen as the one who helped end Voldemort's reign for a second time, but I have bad news for you. I'm the one who caused him to vanish the first time. And I'll be the one who sends him away again this time. Whether it's with your help or not. I don't *want* to fight you. But I will if you stand in my way. Why the *hell* won't you just start ***telling*** me things? What is so god damned hard about letting me in so that I'm prepared?!" Harry yelled.

"I was merely trying to spare you the added stress of what was truly happening." Dumbledore stated. "As usual, it seems my decision has upset you."

Dismissing all of the light creatures, Harry sat down and threw Dumbledore his wand back. "You should let *me* decide if something's too stressful for me." He murmured, the red in his eyes slipping away. "So. What are you going to do with me?"

Looking over at Snape to ensure he wasn't going to kill Harry, Dumbledore put his wand away and sat down as well. "I do not know. The fact remains that you have killed in cold blood."

"So convict me and lock me away. And then watch as Voldemort's new army storms back into Britain." Harry said, crossing his arms. "Vernon Dursley being alive is something that's haunted me every day since my aunt and cousin were killed. He didn't deserve life. And really, it's only due to my attacking him and leaving him petrified on the floor that day that kept him from joining them. Maybe I was just finishing the job the Death Eaters started."

"What would you have me do, Harry?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Same thing you usually do as far as I'm concerned." Harry said, glaring at the headmaster.

"Which is?"

"Doing nothing at all."

Harry closed his eyes and blew out a sigh. "Now are you going to tell me what's going on in Germany? Or am I going to have to go there myself and hunt Riddle down on my own?"

"Albus, you cannot be thinking of allowing him to get away with actual murder!" Snape roared.

"Why not? He lets *you* do it." Muttered Harry. "I killed a man who had no qualms with beating a little kid to the verge of death. You just slaughter the innocent to keep your *job*. Bit of a difference, I'd say."

Snape was about to reply, but Dumbledore brought a hand up to stop him. "Severus, please do not make this any harder than it needs to be. You have both done things I am sure you wish you had not

needed to do. The fact is that we are all on the same side and need to start acting as such."

"You are going to allow this. I can't believe what I'm hearing." Snape said.

"Oh shut up and stop your bloody whining, you greasy-haired bastard. Be glad I haven't lost my sanity to the point where 'good' and 'bad' have lost all meaning to me. My sense of justice has changed in the last few years, but I'm still working with you people, aren't I? You're no better than I am, Snape. So why don't you stop acting like you are?" Harry snapped.

"Because I *am* better than you, Potter. Do you understand what it takes to work as a spy for the Order?" Asked Snape.

"Apparently murdering without consequence." Replied Harry, his tone deadpan. "So what's the problem, jackass?"

Snape slammed his hands into the table as he got to his feet. "What's the **PROBLEM?!**"

"Severus!" Dumbledore yelled. "...Calm down. You have been under a lot of stress yourself as of late."

"Don't tell me how stressed I am, Albus! If I'm stressed out, it's because you allow Potter to get away with whatever he sees fit, including murder and threatening your own life!" Snape cried.

"He was merely trying to prove a point." Dumbledore said, brushing off the accusation. "We both know he is correct. He needs to know more."

"And I keep telling you that it's *dangerous* for him to know more!" Snape roared. "He went off and killed his uncle and none of us could peg him as the killer! What do you think he's going to do when he learns where the Dark Lord is and what he's up to?!"

"I think he will have the presence of mind to listen to what I have to say before making his decision." Dumbledore said, looking to Harry. "Am I correct in assuming this?"

"As long as you start letting me in, I'll do what you want." Harry said, shrugging. "But this hiding important information from me is going to end."

"Very well. Severus, go home and rest. Collect yourself. Let yourself get some sleep. Try not to think about this so much. Harry has been right about one thing, if nothing else." Dumbledore said, reaching out and putting a hand on Snape's shoulder.

"And what would that be?" Asked Snape, looking off.

"The sooner we can mobilize, the sooner we can rid the world of Tom Riddle. And the sooner that happens, the sooner you can stop putting yourself through the wringer for us." Dumbledore said.

"And become thoroughly useless." Snape added.

"Bawww, I'm Snape. I'm useless unless I'm a murdering spy! Bawww, I can't enjoy my job at Hogwarts because I'm bitter and can't let go of the past! *Bawwww*, why does Harry let a pass for killing? That's **MY** job!" Harry mocked.

"Harry, that is quite enough." Warned Dumbledore.

Snape got to his feet and leveled a tired glare at Harry, who just gave the man a bored look in return. "...Very well. But this isn't over, Potter. I've long since grown tired of seeing you get away with everything you want. Rest assured, that attitude will come back to bite you when you least expect it."

"Is that a threat, Snape?" Asked Harry.

"No, Potter. It's a promise." Snape said, eyes narrowing as he turned and slipped out of the room.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

## Chapter 4 – Chain Reactions

Harry smirked as he tossed the Daily Prophet onto the coffee table. A week had passed since he had given his radio interview. As expected, there was a general panic and uproar throughout wizarding Britain. And while Dumbledore had done his best to quell the supposed rumors, the Prophet had actually come through. Because while it loved picking on Harry, Dumbledore was an even greater target. And once the Prophet had set its sights on him, there was no stopping it. A front page story told how a team of reporters had found out that Harry had been telling the truth in regards to his past. In addition, as icing on the cake and in what Harry saw as an attempt to snipe him in the same swoop as Dumbledore, it had reported that Harry apparently wasn't aware of his uncle's death.

"Looks like things are going your way for once, Potter." Malfoy commented. He was sitting across the room in a chair, staring at another copy of the newspaper. "I'm still surprised you wanted to cause this kind of uproar."

"The world is garbage." Harry said, gesturing vaguely with his left hand. "Let them get worked up. Hearing the truth shook them up. Up until now, they've been living in the bubble that Albus has decided to set them up in. One where the world is safe so long as he exists. I popped that bubble last weekend and everyone's afraid. And yet the Prophet seems to have come to my defense. People blindly believe it like they believe Albus. It's fun seeing him be utterly furious and frustrated because of what I did. Let *him* feel the pressure for once."

"How do you know he's frustrated?" Asked Malfoy, lowering the paper enough to look at Harry.

"I've had a light clone on him since I got back that night." Harry said, smirking again. "Takes a surprisingly low amount of magic to keep it going if I'm not having it actually fight or do anything aside from staying shifted. He has no idea it's there. Fun fact - Albus knows some colorful swear words."

Malfoy snorted. "You sure of that, Potter?"

"What, that he doesn't know it's there? Positive." Harry replied. "I doubt he'd show weakness if he knew he was being spied on. He's totally been overmaneuvered and he has no way to silence the noise now that it's running rampant."

"You're loving every minute of it, aren't you?"

"I won't lie, it's been amusing to see him being thoroughly unable to fix this little 'problem' I've caused. I'm hoping the pressure builds until he breaks and admits I'd be the better one to lead the Order. My way of doing things - the *correct* way of doing things. My rules, my missions, *my* Order." Harry said.

"And if he keeps trying to play the figurehead role?" Asked Malfoy.

"Then I'll break contact with him, start my own Order, and use it to crush Voldemort. I don't need his people. I need mine. Because I can trust you guys. And unlike him, I won't send anyone blindly on missions. Anything I want done, I'll be out doing myself. But I've long since learned that trying to go it alone is foolish." Harry explained. "I'll take you guys with me, no matter the outcome of this crisis I've thrown Britain into. Providing you want to come, of course."

Malfoy folded his copy of the Prophet up and set it on one arm of his chair. "Staying behind means another year of schooling I don't need. Following you means having a chance at killing my father. You're more trustworthy than Dumbledore is. Slytherin House has no more internal conflicts. We made sure of that. And if any show up this year, they'll be so few in number that they won't dare make their move. I'm going with you."

Stretching, Harry let out a yawn. "Rrrrrgh... been sitting here staring at the Prophet for too long. I have other things I need to be doing."

"Such as?"

"I have a number of people I need to write to in Diagon Alley. And Knockturn Alley. It's all long overdue."

"Oh? Mind if I tag along to see what you plan to order?" Asked Malfoy, getting to his feet.

"You're going to follow me whether I want you to or not. We might as well figure out where everyone else is, too. Nym's probably still asleep. I'd better go up and check really quick before gathering everyone. I wouldn't want to embarrass her, after all." Harry said, standing and rounding the couch.

"I'd ask what you mean, but I have a feeling I don't want to know." Malfoy commented, cocking an eyebrow. "You do that, I'll search for the girls."

"Works for me. Just bring everyone upstairs. Nym'll be dressed by then, surely." Harry said, rolling his eyes. "I'll spray her with ice water if she doesn't get outta bed..."

"I'd love to see you write a book on how to woo women, Potter. I can see it now - 'Step one: hose them with freezing water to get them out of bed. Step two: Get punched in the groin so hard your grandchildren will be aching. Step three: Seek out ice for said groin injury.'"

"Stifle it, Malfoy, lest I release the twins in your direction." Harry said, giving Malfoy a withering glance over his shoulder.

"Oh my, using my last name again after all this time? You must be serious." Said Malfoy, smirking at Harry.

"Oi. I can only imagine what a road trip with YOU would be like." Harry said, starting up the stairs as Malfoy headed towards the library.

"Let's hope we never have to find out, then."

"Agreed."

**oOoOoOoOoOo**

That night, someone unexpected dropped by Number Twelve after dinner. Harry and his friends were heading towards the library. But a sudden burst of flames erupting from the nearby fireplace caused them to peer into the living room. Through the green flames came the Minister of Magic himself, looking none too pleased. Spotting Harry immediately, Scrimgeour walked over and stared him down.

"You've given us a lot of work." He stated.

Harry smiled at the Minister. "Work that needed to be done, no doubt. I've already helped you eliminate the threat of Death Eaters. Don't tell me I need to do every other part of your job for you. It would be counter-productive of me to tell the truth then try to cover it up. Well done letting the Prophet get their story through."

"Don't mouth off to me, boy." Scrimgeour said, eyes narrowing. "The Prophet kept their story hidden until it was too late for the Ministry to do a damn thing about it. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"Call me a boy again and I'll twist your god damn head off." Harry said, jabbing Scrimgeour in the chest with one of his clawed fingers. "I've done what had to be done. I've told him and I'll tell you - you'll bend to my will or you'll get left behind. This war won't get done by sitting on our asses and waiting for Voldemort to return. You can either be with me or against me. At this point, I don't really give a shit either way. Because I'm going to stop him. It's up to you whether you're with me or against me."

"Laying an ultimatum to the Minister himself, are you?" Scrimgeour asked, batting Harry's Gauntlet-clad hand away. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"The only one capable of stopping him." Harry stated, crossing his arms. "I'll say again - you're either with me or against me. I won't allow middle ground. I'm going after him soon. It's all a matter of how much support I'll have."

"As the Minister, I can't take sides. I have to remain unbiased while still trying to run damage control. You should know that." Scrimgeour said.

Harry nodded, smirking. "Indeed I do. And I'm merely saying you're either with me or against me. And since you're incapable of choosing do your position, you won't be able to offer me assistant. Ergo, you're against me and will be treated as such. I seem to be losing command of this stupid little world with each passing day. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother trying to save it."

"Because no matter how insane you might become, your sense of justice remains in place." Said Scrimgeour, blowing out a quiet sigh. "We've been told it was you that killed your uncle, however. Makes it a bit hard to say that with a straight face."

"Ah, Albus spilled the beans, did he? Fantastic." Harry said, grinning now. "I was wondering what your stance on it would be."

"Then you aren't denying your involvement?"

"Denying? I'll tell you how long I tortured the miserable bastard for and how many times he *tried* to scream if you'd like." Harry said, his voice turning cold despite his happy appearance. "Every time he tried to scramble to get away, only to be pinned to the ground with a dozen red-hot bolts. Every time he begged me to stop, only to be reminded that *he* never did when I was the one begging. I can show you, if you think you have the stomach for it. You might want to look away when I pierce his eyes, though. It isn't a pleasant sight."

"Potter..."

Laughing, Harry turned away. Stopping to glance over his shoulder, Harry murmured, "You'll allow it, Rufus. You'll allow it because what alternative do you have? Lock me away and Britain will assuredly fall under Voldemort's command. All of your work to purge your precious, useless Ministry of Death Eaters will be for nothing. Everything I've done to halt his progress will be for nothing. Every death he's caused will be in vain. You know you can't imprison me, Rufus, and that bothers you. You wouldn't be capable of it, even if you wanted to. Anyone who dares to try holding me back at this point will suffer for it. I'm done playing nicely. While you people sit and talk politics and why you can't go into Germany to take him out, I'll be plotting a way to trap him like a rat. And when the time comes, I'll be leaving. Whether I have support from you or Albus when that time comes doesn't matter to me. Because the truth is, you're both worthless. Neither of you can do anything, despite all the supposed power at your disposal. So you're dependant on me for success. No... you won't do a damn thing about what I did to Vernon Dursley, Rufus. Because if you tried, I guarantee you that the Ministry would be destroyed by the time the sun rises."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Harry's birthday came and went without any fanfare. He had specifically requested to not have a party, stating that once he killed Voldemort, *then* they could celebrate. And, as the last month of the summer rolled around, Number Twelve played host to a few more people. Hermione and the Weasleys had all turned up one cloudy day, much to the annoyance of Harry and Malfoy. The two had holed themselves up in one of the upper rooms of the house that day, plotting battle strategies and how best to get out of sticky situations. Even as they did this, they could hear Mrs. Weasley rampaging through the house, looking for Harry.

"Figured you'd want to have a toe-to-toe with her." Whispered Malfoy, glancing up at Harry after they heard the woman stomp by beneath them.

"I didn't sleep well last night. Need a bit more energy to face down that old cow." Harry muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

A few hours before dinner, Malfoy got up and stated he was going to go change into some less dusty clothing and see how things were looking. Harry joined him in leaving and the two parted ways. Malfoy headed downstairs and Harry quickly made his way towards and into his bedroom. Closing the door behind him, he groaned. "I... need a nap."

As Harry crossed the room, Balthazar's gem pulsed slowly as he asked, "I take it we will be getting into an argument with someone later?"

Toppling face-first onto the bed, Harry muttered, "World's most irritating woman. We may end up pinning her to the ceiling somehow. Know any good sticking spells?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Great." Harry mumbled, turning his head to the side. "Okay, I'm gonna get some sleep. Wake me in a few hours, yeah?"

"As you wish."

Unfortunately for Harry, he wasn't allowed that much sleep. After just shy of an hour of being in bed, a pounding came at his door, followed by a distinct voice yelling, "I know you're in there! Open this door right now, young man!"

"Oh goody, Mrs. Weasley has arrived." Growled Harry, one eye cracked open.

"Harry Potter, *OPEN THIS DOOR!*"

Groaning, Harry shoved himself out of bed. Brushing his hair down with his left hand, he crossed the room and jerked the door open, glaringly at the Weasley matron with a groggy hatred in his eyes.

"Can I help you?" He asked, voice scratchy.

"What is the meaning of all of this?" Asked Mrs. Weasley, putting her hands on her hips and giving him a mean glare of her own.

"I believe it's called being 'rudely awakened,' but I'm sure that isn't the technical term." Harry stated. He took a step back, grabbed the door, and promptly slammed it shut.

There was a momentary pause, followed by what sounded like the sound of the doorknob clattering for a moment. She had tried to open the door again, only to realize that it was still password protected from the outside. The banging started back up against. Harry let it continue for a minute before pulling the door open again.

"Don't you dare do that again." Mrs. Weasley stated, her voice warning him she was serious.

"Haven't you any manners, you withered old gargoyle?" Harry asked, rubbing the back of his neck. Sleeping on his stomach always left kinks in it that took forever to work out. "Either tell me what the hell you're raving about this time or go away and leave me to my nap."

"You know perfectly well what this is about, young man." Mrs. Weasley stated. "All that nonsense about Albus and what he's done! The only reason I haven't been to question you in person sooner was because he felt it too dangerous to travel willy-nilly!"

"I told only the truth." Harry said, looking at Mrs. Weasley with one eye open. "I really don't give a damn what his sheep think of me. They aren't the ones I was trying to reach, anyway. I don't need their help, as they're so blind they'd walk off a cliff if instructed to by him. Now go the hell away. I was having a really pleasant dream for once."

"I certainly will *not* go away!" Mrs. Weasley said, taking a step into the room as Harry reached for the door again.

Opening his other eye and narrowing both, Harry whispered, "Get out of my room."

"Not until you say you'll apologize!"

"Get. Out. Of. My. Room." Harry repeated, taking a step forward and getting in Mrs. Weasley's face.

"I will not be threatened by you." Mrs. Weasley said. "Now promise you'll apologize!"

"Indeed you won't. Because I don't warn people more than once. I said 'get out' and I bloody well meant it." Harry stated. Taking a step back, he held his Gauntlet-clad hand in front of him and growled, "But because you're the mother of a few of my friends, I'll give you once last chance."

In response, Mrs. Weasley drew her wand.

Narrowing his eyes, Harry hissed, "*Cruento.*" The spell shot from a small opening on the palm of the Gauntlet, slamming into Mrs. Weasley and causing her to totter for a second. Her eyes quickly became large as she stared down at herself, imagining herself covered in blood. As she stepped back, Harry stepped forward, muttering, "*Incarcerous.*" Thicks ropes appeared around Mrs. Weasley, quickly wrapping themselves tightly around her.

Harry walked up to Mrs. Weasley, who seemed to have been rendered speechless due to the effects of his first spell. He watched her for a moment before hissing, "You're going to leave me and my friends alone, you bloody cow. Because if you don't, I'll do a lot worse than make you *think* you're covered in blood. And I'll do far worse

than tie you up. If you were anyone else, I would have blown a hole through you by now. Consider yourself lucky. And now, so you can have some time to think about what you've done... *Petrificus Totalus.*"

Jabbing Mrs. Weasley with his wand after pulling it from his pocket, the woman went rigid and promptly toppled over. Harry then ducked back into his room for a moment and began rummaging in his dresser drawers. Finding what he was after, he levitated his trunk into the hallway. Turning back to Mrs. Weasley, he smiled pleasantly down at her. "Now then, while you're hallucinating and incapable of moving, it's time to put you on the ceiling."

Stepping up onto his trunk, he aimed his wand at Mrs. Weasley and in seconds her body was levitating. Moving her up to the roof of the hall, he grabbed one end of the duct tape he was holding and pulled.

**oOoOoOoOoOo**

Dinner was late that night. Harry sat in the kitchen, an amused look on his face as he idly twirled Cedric's wand. He had disillusioned Mrs. Weasley after duct taping her to the ceiling, figuring it'd take a few hours for anyone to notice. Of course, Ginny and the twins had noticed their mother's disappearance rather quickly. And, rightfully suspecting Harry, they had gone to question him about it. He had merely told them that she was 'hanging around' and would turn up in time to feed everyone.

The kitchen was still fairly empty, given it was after when dinner usually started. Mostly it was Harry and his friends, along with a mere handful of Order members. Tonks, sitting next to Harry, asked, "So what have you been so damn happy about today?"

"What don't I have to be happy about? It's been a rather wonderful day, all told. And it's only going to get better once Albus arrives. He'll be along in about five minutes, by the way." Said Harry.

"How do you know how long he'll be?" Asked Andromeda.

"I see everything." Harry replied, cryptically. "I know these things. Trust me."

Andromeda huffed and muttered something quietly under her breath. Lupin was quick to come over to her and rub her shoulders, hurriedly whispering what Harry only could assume were calming words to her.

True to his word, despite a few people betting otherwise, Dumbledore showed up roughly five minutes later. Harry quickly bit back a laugh as Andromeda gaped at him. For his part, the headmaster seemed confused, but shook it off and took his usual seat.

"I am sorry I am late. I am afraid I have been tied up with... business." Dumbledore said, giving Harry a quick glance. "...Where is Molly?"

"Good question." Ginny said, eyeballing Harry. "Scarhead over here says she's around somewhere, but it's been way too quiet for that."

"...Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "Where is Molly?"

"I dunno. Check outside my room. She seems to be fond of hitting the door and disrupting my sleep. She could be loitering around anywhere." Harry said, leaning back in his chair and grinning lazily. "I will say one thing... Sirius would be proud of me."

"Oh god." Lupin suddenly said, bolting from the room. Harry nearly fell over backwards with laughter as the werewolf's voice cried out a few minutes later, "You **DID** do it!"

Slipping from his chair, Harry tucked Cedric's wand back up his left sleeve and motioned for the people in the kitchen to follow him, which they did. Leading them up the chairs, they found Lupin removing the disillusion spell from Mrs. Weasley. The body-bind had long since worn off, since he had only put a tiny amount of power into it. But she WAS firmly duct taped to the ceiling. Several layers of tape were covering her mouth.

"*Harry!*" Ginny cried, slugging Harry in the arm before rushing over to help Lupin.

"Well, mate..." Said Fred, leaning against one of Harry's shoulders.

"I guess that's one way to do it." Finished George, leaning against the other.

"You do realize we'll have to get you back though, right?" They said in unison.

"Oh, I'm fully expecting backlash." Harry said, closing his eyes and smiling. "But she was being quite rude to me. She wouldn't leave me be when I wanted to nap, she refused to get out of my room after I'd asked, and she wanted me to apologize. She seems to be one of the best in your flock, Albus." His voice dropped in pleasantness as he continued, "But don't expect me to be so innocent in my retribution in the future. Anyone who draws their wand against me is a fool. I don't care who it is. I will not have people trying to intimidate me. I will not have them criticizing me. This will be my Order soon. I won't allow dissension in the ranks."

"You... you little...!" Mrs. Weasley sputtered, rubbing the sore spot around her mouth where the duct tape had just been yanked from. "I ought to..."

"You ought to shut your gaping pie-hole before you say something you regret." Harry stated, moving forward from the pack and walking towards the woman. "I don't care what you do. Be in his flock like the obedient little sheep you are. I'll be finishing this war while you sit on your ass acting as though nothing was happening. I'll be the one out there risking his life, just as I have every year since arriving at Hogwarts. I'll be the one to stare down Tom Riddle and put him away forever. I've been pushed around enough, you damned battleaxe. I'm of age now. The only thing holding me back is the desire to see how this little foolish game plays out. I'm well aware of the ending, of course. But yet I hold out hope. For what reason is beyond even my comprehension, as it's stupid of me to even think Albus and his flock will do the right thing. Things are going to change soon. Whether you accept the change and move forward or whether you deny it and get left behind, it makes no difference to me. Just stay out of my way and you'll be fine. Doing everything in your power to anger me, however... that's a dangerous move. You'd do well to remember that."

Mrs. Weasley reared a hand back, aiming to slap Harry. She moved slower than even Dudley used to when he would throw punches. Harry had ample time to bring his Gauntlet-clad hand up and over to

block the shot. Mrs. Weasley let out a yelp as soft flesh connected to jagged metal.

"You foolish, foolish woman." Harry whispered, shaking his head slowly. "So blind to reality. Perhaps I should advance my plans. ...Yes, I think that might be for the best. The first day of school... hm. But for that, I would need..." He glanced off, eyes unfocusing for a moment. Finally, he nodded, looking back up at Mrs. Weasley and smirking. "Let me ask you a question."

Mrs. Weasley said nothing.

"What would happen to your precious little family if I were to abandon the wizarding world?" Harry asked.

"Albus would help keep us safe, of course." Said Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh? And what makes you believe him capable of that?" Asked Harry.

"He's the strongest wizard in Britain, if not the world." Mrs. Weasley stated.

"Wrong. That title belongs to me. Riddle is in second place. Albus might hold third, but I haven't seen Draco fight in awhile, so don't hold me to that. Albus isn't anywhere near strong enough to fight Riddle and whatever army he might be dredging up. Albus wasn't able to save anyone from the Dementors, either. That was all *me*. I nearly died countless times saving you foolish god damned sheep. How many times do you want me to nearly kill myself? How many times must I do that before you open your eyes to reality?"

Mrs. Weasley was once again silent. Scowling, Harry brushed past her and rapidly hissed out the password to his bedroom. Standing in the doorway, holding the door open, Harry looked over his shoulder. "You're out of your vector. If it wasn't for me, Voldemort would have won by now. And still you treat me like shit. Maybe I should abandon you. Then we'll see how strong Albus really is, won't we? What do you say, Albus? Can you handle the burden all by yourself again?"

"I would do my best, Harry." Said Dumbledore. "That is all I can promise."

"And if your best isn't good enough?" Asked Harry.

"What do you want me to say?" The headmaster asked. "As it seems there is no way to answer that question correctly."

"And there's a reason for that." Harry said. "Nym, if you want in, best come now. I plan to get back to that nap I was so rudely knocked out of."

Tonks broke away from the crowd and crossed the distance, pausing only a moment beside Mrs. Weasley. "I feel sorry for you."

"You feel sorry for me? Why?" Asked Mrs. Weasley.

But Tonks just shook her head, walking over to Harry. The two stepped into the room and Harry closed the door behind them. As he walked towards the bed, he murmured a silencing spell on the door. No one would be interrupting his sleep this time. "My head hurts."

"That's your brain trying to comprehend its own stupidity." Tonks said, walking over and kissing Harry's forehead.

"Ha ha, very funny." Harry muttered, throwing himself backwards onto the bed and groaning. "Ugh. Why does everyone have to be so stubborn, Nym? Why are they so *blind*? Can't they see that my being in charge would expedite things? All I want to do is rest. And I don't get to until Riddle is gone. Yet they want to prolong the buildup. I guess they want to be war heroes, saying they took out a few score of abominations. No one can grasp the simple concept that the longer we wait, the more danger we're in."

Tonks nodded, sitting next to Harry and leaning back on her arms. "What do you think they're doing out there?"

"The old gorgon's probably ranting furiously about how Albus needs to keep me under control or something. Draco's out there somewhere. I'm sure he'll shut her up if it needs to happen. I hope Ginny and the twins aren't too mad at me for dressing down their mother like that." Harry said.

"They'll live." Tonks said, scooting up onto the bed and curling up on her side. As she cuddled up against Harry, she asked, "What's on *your* mind?"

"Not a lot, really. Wondering how I'll look with all that stuff I ordered, mostly. I'm trying not to think too far ahead. Balthazar says it isn't good for my health." Harry said, wrapping his arms around Tonks.

"Mm. He's right, you know."

"What about you?"

"Nothing, really. Too hungry to think." Tonks whined. "You cost me my dinner, you know."

"Hold please." Harry said. He went stock still suddenly, causing Tonks to sit up slightly.

"Harry? ...Oi, whatcha doin'?" She asked, frowning.

"Getting you food." Harry said, cracking an eye open as a light clone shifted in next to the bed, holding a small bowl of fruit. "It isn't much, but people were nearing the kitchen. Guess Mrs. Weasley decided to focus on cooking to vent her frustration."

"Dummy. I can wait until after we nap." Tonks said, laying her head back down and kissing Harry's cheek. "Still sweet of you, though."

The light clone set the fruit down on the table next to the bed before disappearing. Harry didn't want to try remote controlling two of them when sleeping. One was difficult enough. He still had one of his clones monitoring Dumbledore and planned to continue doing so for a good while. Leaning his head against Tonks', Harry asked, "Why don't we get into bed properly?"

"We're too damn lazy?"

"Good answer. Sweet dreams, Nymmy." Harry said.

"You too, jackass." Tonks giggled.

"Oi..."

oOoOoOoOoOo

A loud **THUMP** coming from the floor caused Harry to wake next. Letting out a discontent growl, he muttered, "What the hell are they doing *now*?"

Tonks, still curled up against him, began to stir. "Nn...?"

"Noise downstairs, Nym. Gonna go check it out. Be back in a flash." Harry said, turning his head to kiss Tonks' forehead. The Armor engulfed him and he snapped down through the floor after shifting.

Apparently, a *book* had been what had hit the ceiling in the room under his. What was stranger than a flying book was who had apparently thrown it. Harry hung back and witnessed the scene before him playing out, trying to make sense of just what was going on. Malfoy was sitting in the middle of the small, den-like room, looking for all the world as though he simply wanted to lose himself in the nearby fire. But the two girls occupying the room were doing their damnedest to not let that happen.

Pansy being fired up was certainly nothing new. Hermione, however...

"--makes you think *you* deserve him?!" Yelled the Gryffindor girl, glaring daggers at Pansy.

Pansy merely crossed her arms. "Deserve him? You act as if he's a thing you can simply own. I'm his friend, you bloody harpy. Whether or not you want to believe that or not is up to you."

"You think I'm going to believe that? Just because I'm not a Ravenclaw doesn't mean I'm an idiot!" Hermione snapped. "You two have been around each other ever since--"

"Ever since you abandoned him after he risked his life to help Harry get the gem off of Azkaban." Pansy finished, smirking. "And I know you Gryffindor types aren't that observant, but I've been hanging around Draco far longer than that. We've been friends since we were

both little. I've got news for you, honey, it isn't going to stop any time soon."

"We'll see about that!" Hermione argued, grabbing for another book.

But Pansy was faster. As Hermione stood back up - she was chucking her personal stash at Pansy, which made the event that much more baffling - Pansy had quickly stepped forward and decked Hermione with an almighty slap.

Malfoy's eyes shifted back to the flames as the echo died.

"You never deserved someone of Draco's caliber, you jealous little bitch." Pansy stated, stepping back and smirking. "For someone who says she's a level-headed thinker, you don't seem to show it much. You gravitate towards Draco completely at random, break up with him completely at random, whore yourself out to some piece of eye candy as quick as you can, then get jealous when I'm in his general area? I don't know what the hell's gotten into you, Granger, but you're about as psychotic as that Umbridge woman was."

"You don't know anything!" Growled Hermione, pulling her arm back to fling the book.

Before she could fire her projectile, however, Harry hopped magical currents to make his grand entrance. He picked a route coming from above so that he could enter with a bit of force. Sure enough, he shifted back in just as he slammed into the ground, catching everyone but Malfoy off guard. In a kneeling position, he let himself continue staring forward - off towards one side of the room, around where the floor met the wall - as he asked, "Is there a problem here?"

"Ask the psychotic Gryffindor." Pansy said, her voice dry. "She came in here and started verbally abusing me, accused me of 'stealing' Draco away from her, then lobbed a book at me."

Harry stood, leaving the Armor going as he glanced from Pansy to Hermione. "Is that true?"

"So what if it is?" Asked Hermione, refusing to meet Harry's unblinking gaze.

"I don't know the story behind this. I don't want to know the story behind this. It's Draco's business and not mine. I don't care. What I do care about is getting some bloody sleep. I guess I need to ward the entire room to be soundproof, as the book hitting the ceiling - how that happened I can only imagine - woke me up. I've been very cranky today, Hermione. Go ask Mrs. Weasley about that if you'd like. In any case, whatever the hell your sudden problem with Pansy is, I suggest you drop it." Harry said.

Hearing Pansy bite back a snicker, he quickly looked her way. "And you, Pansy, need to just drag Draco into a closet and snog him senseless or something, because watching you dance around how you really feel is a bit tiresome."

"I... I don't have any idea what you're talking about, you jackass!" Pansy said, blushing faintly as she glared at Harry. "Don't go putting words in my mouth. I'm his *friend*. Apparently a guy can't have female friends he doesn't want to become emotionally involved with, is that what you're saying?"

"That's apparently what Hermione's saying." Harry said. "Me, I don't care. I have plenty of female friends I have no romantic interests in. What I am saying is that you need to stop pretending and Hermione needs to get over Draco moving on. Otherwise, apologize and let it go. I'm going back to bed. I assume I won't have to come and babysit you two again. But just in case, remember one thing..."

Harry shifted away, but one of his light clones remained behind. It looked between Pansy and Hermione before whispering, "I'm always watching."

And with that, it too shifted.

As Harry reappeared upstairs, he dropped the armor and sighed. "Great. Forced to keep a second one running. At least for the time being."

Cracking an eye open, Tonks asked, "A second one what?"

"A second light clone. Hermione's going crazy in Pansy's general direction. No idea what's going on, but I could probably make some

reasonable guesses. I'd say Draco just found himself caught at the tip of a love triangle."

"Sounds familiar." Tonks said, latching back onto Harry as he flopped back down onto the bed.

Harry nodded slowly. "And I wish him the best of luck. Now then... where were we?"

"Sleeping. Quite well, at that." Tonks said, yawning overtaking her midway through her sentence.

"Ah yes. Sleeping. Hopefully my clone will be able to keep those two from tearing each other apart until we feel like leaving the bedroom." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"Hopefully. Doubt it, but hopefully."

"Why must you risk jinxing it?"

"Because you're cute when you're groggy. You wobble."

"I certainly do not." Harry said, making a face.

Giggling, Tonks poked his side. "You do! You completely do! You were wobbling just now, right after you released the Armor!"

"You're half-asleep. Anything you saw was merely a product of your sleep-deprived brain." Harry stated. "So let it enjoy itself and go back to dreamland."

"If I wasn't so keen on getting some more sleep, I'd lay here and argue this with you for awhile. Maybe later, though." Tonks said.

"Maybe later." Harry agreed. "Sweet dreams again, Nym."

"Night..." Tonks said, her voice fading a little. "Let's hope Malfoy can sleep without fear of Hermione looming over him."

"Great, now I'm going to dream about Hermione absconding with Draco. Because *that's* what I need to spend my time doing. Hunting a crazed, jealous Gryffindor all over the country... ugh."

Tonks giggled again. "Shut up or I'll end up dreaming about it, too."

"It'd serve you right. Wench. OW!"

Tonks smirked, moving her fist away from Harry's arm. "Sleep well!" She chirped.

"One of these days I'm going to douse you in ice water." Harry mumbled.

"And one day I'll hoist you by your boxers up a flagpole. Get some sleep!" Tonks ordered.

"Yes ma'am." Harry replied, chuckling. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms back around Tonks' body, settling back in. He knew he wasn't going to get any sleep, though. Hermione would need to be... talked to... properly in the future. He couldn't risk having any rusty cogs in an otherwise well-maintained machine. Even more confusing was why Malfoy himself had been doing nothing to stop the argument.

As Tonks' breathing began to change, signalling to him that she was drifting off, he opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling.

Whatever was going on this time, he needed to know the story behind it.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** Harry vs Mrs. Weasley yet again. I couldn't resist finally having him duct tape her to the ceiling. Somewhere out there, Sirius was rolling around giggling like a schoolgirl, I assure you.

And we see more of Draco's strange little love triangle and a very angry Hermione. When Hermione's mad enough to start lobbing books, you know you're in trouble. Poor Draco. He just wanted to sit and relax. Then the girls busted in on him and started fighting.

Not much to say this time, kids. Tune in next time when the pace picks up a little. And by 'a little' I mean 'headquarters is attacked' - seeya then!

## Chapter 5 – The Attack on Headquarters

The tension had been high in Number Twelve since Harry had 'proved' himself to Dumbledore. He had been in a foul mood since then, one no one had been able to knock him out of. He kept going off to think in some abandoned room or train with Balthazar. There was too much on his mind and he needed to get a game plan together. Voldemort had been on the move. Snape had reported it and Dumbledore had told him as much. But he wasn't telling him *all* of it. Harry had kept his light clone on Dumbledore and he had found out much that way. But he was biding his time. He had already secured the items he was going to need, after all.

Voldemort had apparently set up a base camp somewhere in a large forest in the middle of nowhere. Snape said no one was told the exact location. They merely apparated and the Dark Mark helped guide them. This didn't sit well with Harry. There were a *lot* of giant forests across Germany, which was a big place to begin with. He needed more to go on. But if the Dark Lord was having any extreme thoughts, they weren't coming through his scar. It was all dead air. Harry didn't like it when there were silent periods lasting this long. Voldemort was probably keeping himself good and busy. And that would lead to nothing good.

By the time August began to come to an end, Harry and Balthazar were working as a well-oiled machine. For the first time, Harry had full access to every ounce of his magical power. It was a good feeling, though he tried not to let the power go to his head. He had no plans to replace Voldemort. Destroying the Order of the Phoenix, sure, but they were different. The Order needed to start over. It was going to happen shortly, whether any of them felt like it or not.

In addition, the items he had ordered from Diagon and Knockturn Alley finally arrived. He hadn't known it was going to take so damn long, else he would have put them in sooner. If they had come any later, it would have interfered with his plans. Well... that was an outright lie, but he still would have been irritated to no end. And no one wanted Harry to be irritated anymore. As time progressed, they seemed to be walking on eggshells around him. That was fine with

Harry, who enjoyed the peace and quiet that reigned in the Black household.

Coming back to his room late one night, Harry slid in quietly. It was a dumb thing to do, however, as Tonks was sitting up in bed. He had told her time and again that she shouldn't wait up for him, but she always did. She would sit up and read, setting the book down when he came back, no matter what hour of the night it was.

Scowling, he rubbed the back of his neck as he crossed the room. "Nym, how many times...?"

"As many as I tell you, probably." Said Tonks, smiling at him. "So, what were you out pondering this time?"

"Food." Harry said, eyebrows raised as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"So go down and get something." Tonks said.

"No, I mean for the trip." Harry said.

"Still planning it, huh?"

"Yeah."

"You sure you're going to be able to?"

"Positive. Balthazar and I have spent many nights talking about it. Just re-thinking all the little details no one but me would bother thinking about so much. Must have some obsessive compulsive thing in that regard, I don't know." Harry said.

"The food'll be fine." Tonks said, lightly bopping Harry's shoulder. "Come on, get changed and climb in."

"What time is it?" Asked Harry, getting back up and crossing the room again.

"Just after two." Tonks said, letting out a yawn as she slid down under the covers.

"One of the perks of everyone being spooked about making me mad is never getting awakened too early." Harry said, changing into something more comfortable to sleep in. Walking back to the bed, he crawled in next to Tonks and glanced over. "Just wake me up whenever you get up, okay? Only a few days left."

"Yeah. I can't believe Dumbledore hasn't said anything yet." Tonks said, snuggling up against Harry. "You think he's waiting 'til the last moment?"

"No, I think he genuinely believes me returning to Hogwarts is a good idea. He's an idiot. How many times do I have to explain that we need to get this show on the road? He's just idling in the water. If he's hiding something, he's doing a damn good job of it. I know he still doesn't suspect me having a light clone on him. To hell with Albus, though. I'm not going back. There's a war that needs ending. I can't end a war if I'm stuck listening to that old crone blather on about transfiguration." Harry groused.

Kissing him on the cheek, Tonks murmured, "Breathe, dear."

Sighing, Harry closed his eyes. "Sorry. Gotta slow down on the ranting, I know."

"It'll all be over before you know it. Then you'll be whining about having nothing to do." Said Tonks.

"Yeah. When it's over." Harry said.

"Kay, my eyes are really burning over here. I'm out." Tonks said, her voice trailing off a little.

Smiling crookedly, Harry leaned his head against hers. "I keep telling you not to wait up."

**oOoOoOoOoOo**

Hours passed, but Harry was unable to fall asleep. He was having one of those bad feelings again; the type that always came before something happened. He wasn't sure what it meant, but he was on edge because of it. The house was deathly silent, and not because of

the silencing spell Harry had used. He had lifted that shortly after he realized why he couldn't sleep. Now he was waiting. Waiting and hoping he was wrong. The fingers on his Gauntlet-clad hand were clenching and unclenching almost on their own as he strained his ears to try and hear anything that sounded out of place. Was Voldemort doing something? Was something inside of the house? Or was he just being paranoid?

He sat up, thankful that Tonks had rolled over onto her other side not long ago. Slowly and quietly, Harry slipped out of bed. Dressing quickly, he carefully opened the door and slid out into the hallway. He closed his eyes and listened again, but nothing sounded out of place. But the feeling hadn't left him yet. He crept down the hall, pausing to listen outside of every door on the floor. Everyone else was sleeping soundly. He nodded to himself as he headed for the stairs. Maybe he was just being paranoid. It was a feeling he was trying not to let dominate his emotions as of late. Balthazar had told him he might get that way at times. But there was really nothing he could do aside from asserting his will over it.

As he entered the empty kitchen, his eyes darting around, he let out a sigh. Things were fine. No one was in Number Twelve that shouldn't have been. Walking over to the table, he pulled out a chair and sat down. He had to do something about this. It was getting absurd. He knew he was running at full steam and he knew it wasn't healthy. He had to take a step back and start thinking more. He couldn't keep barreling forward aimlessly, or he would be no better than Dumbledore in the end. His analytical thinking had helped get him this far. He wasn't going to just up and abandon it now.

Okay, so... what did he know about that night? He knew it felt as though something was lurking just behind him at any given time. He was half expecting to feel breath on the back of his neck as he walked the silent hallways of Number Twelve. But it never came. Therefore, he was fearing something that wasn't there. Normally, he wouldn't think anything of that, as it would just leave the darkness itself. But Harry knew what could lurk in the dark places of the world. He knew what kind of creatures loved hiding in the shadows. Sometimes he felt like he was turning into one of them.

He stared down at the Gauntlet almost with spite. It was allowing him to control his magic, but it was taking a toll on his sanity. All the more reason to hurry and rid the world of Voldemort. He had to do it before the power of the Gauntlet drove him insane. He had to do it before he ended up doing something he regretted.

He closed his right eye and concentrated on the light clone that was still following Dumbledore. But the headmaster was actually sleeping for a change. So he shifted to the second one he had out. But the man that one was tracking was also sleeping, though his was clearly troubled. With another sigh, Harry opened his eye and stared across the room. No distracting entertainment for him that night, it seemed.

Bringing his left hand up, Harry rubbed at the sides of his neck slowly. The muscles were far too tight. It couldn't be helped, though. Until action was taken, he was going to be stressed to the breaking point. He was trying to keep track of everything going on, the Order's plans, Voldemort's plans, his own plans... it was rough going. He had tried sorting everything using his Occlumency. It helped, to a degree, in that it kept him from staring into space and thinking about battle plans before the fighting was anywhere close to happening. But it did take effort to keep it going.

The stress from keeping two separate light clones going was also starting to tax his body. But he had to do it. He had to know. In reality, Harry wasn't sure why he hadn't thought of it any sooner. He had felt like an absolute idiot when it had occurred to him. He had spent most of that day in a self-loathing funk. He had locked himself in the library to read and only came out after midnight.

Dawn was slowly getting close. In another hour, the sun would crest over the horizon and the denizens of the house would begin to wake. Pushing his chair back, Harry stood up. He needed to at least rest his eyes. It wouldn't do him any good to stop sleeping again. He knew what kind of madness that brought about. But as he left the kitchen and headed towards the stairs, he paused.

Frowning, Harry turned his head and closed his eyes. There was an odd sound, a very faint one, coming from the living room. Licking his dried-out lips, Harry pulled his wands out and slowly turned,

advancing in the direction the noise had come from. As he got closer, the sound grew slightly louder, though he wasn't entirely sure what it was. Pressing his back against the wall just outside the doorway, Harry peeked his head around the corner.

Nothing was there.

The living room was as empty as it ever was at night. And yet... the noise still sounded like it was coming from somewhere within. He was sure nothing was hiding in the darkness. And he was sure it wasn't anything like a Dementor. He had destroyed the remaining stock of those when they had attacked Azkaban. Lethifolds didn't make that kind of noise. It almost sounded like...

A cold chill washed down Harry's spine as he pulled his head back from around the corner. It sounded exactly like something breathing. Or rather, something that was having trouble breathing. He flattened back up against the wall, but didn't dare close his eyes for fear that whatever was inside the room would get him. Only then did he slowly pick out the fact that it wasn't a single noise. In fact, the noise was coming from around the entire room. Sometimes it came from more than one spot.

He took a few steps back and summoned up a light clone, which promptly shifted. Seconds later, it reappeared in the center of the living room. With a low growl, it flared, sacrificing itself to fully illuminate the room for a few seconds. As expected, there were more noises now, mostly coming from those who hadn't closed their eyes. Harry had wanted to check for shadows. And he had seen enough to know that there were at least a dozen people in the room. He was guessing double that, due to the fact that he hadn't wanted to cross the doorway.

Harry was cycling through spells in his mind, trying to figure out the best course of action to take against a large group of opponents of unknown power. But in the few seconds that followed his clone's flare-up, something unexpected happened.

Someone in the room screamed.

Harry glanced around the corner in time to see two people, unhidden, topple over. One had forced the other to the ground, it had looked like. His eyes hadn't fully readjusted from the bright light. More screams followed, along with the sounds of what sounded...

It clicked then. Harry threw up a shield spell as he stepped into the doorway and sent another clone across the room to light up the area near the screaming. As the two people came into view, his shield was hit by multiple curses and hexes. It held, though Harry had to actively focus on it rather than what was happening in front of him.

A Death Eater was the person who had been knocked to the ground. And now Harry knew why. The other person, the one on top and trying to claw and bite at the Death Eater, was clearly rotting. The thing's clothes were badly tattered and caked with grime, and its skin was rotted away in places, exposing the decaying muscles and bone just underneath. Somehow, Voldemort had gotten a team of his men into Number Twelve. And they had brought the undead with them.

Wand to his throat, Harry's amplified voice resounded throughout the entire house as he yelled, "*WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!*"

"Get him!" Roared one of the other Death Eaters, appearing from behind an invisibility cloak. "Unchain the corpses!"

As the sound of opening doors began to come from upstairs, the remaining Death Eaters, some two dozen strong, threw off their various forms of invisibility and disillusionment spells. Along with them, almost shackled via magic, were a little over a dozen undead, all in various stages of decomposition. They were all struggling against their bonds, gnashing with broken teeth at their captors. More spells quickly slammed into Harry's shield and he forced himself to duck back around the corner.

And still, the fallen Death Eater was screaming for help. Moments later, the disgusting sound of something splattering filled the air. Apparently, one of the other Death Eaters had saved his friend by destroying the creature's head. It gave the fallen man long enough a chance to scramble to his feet and regain control over what remained of the undead assigned to him. Even without a head, it would still function if given orders. That, Harry knew, was due to a strong

necromantic magic keeping it together and functioning. The peace of death had been desecrated by Voldemort and his men. And now the poor men and women they had dug up were being used to assault Number Twelve.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Asked Pansy, appearing at the top of the stairs.

"Death Eaters!" Harry called back. "They've got a horde of undead with them! All of you *STAY UP THERE!*"

"Don't be silly!" Stated Andromeda, who had come from the far end of the hall, Lupin close behind. "We're not going to --"

"**YES YOU ARE!**" Harry roared. He whirled to look up the stairs at everyone gathered, a glow to his eyes. "I won't let any of you risk yourselves! That isn't how this Order is going to function anymore!"

"You're under the assumption that we feel pressured to act." Said Lupin, wand drawn. "Let us help you, Harry."

"No." Harry stated. Turning, he pushed more energy into keeping his shield going. "I don't know how the Death Eaters got in. I don't know why they have barely-controlled ghouls with them. I don't know what the undead in that room are capable of. But I won't subject anyone to finding out before I do!"

"You're not fighting alone." Came Tonks' voice.

Harry turned to argue with her, but one of the Death Eaters suddenly yelled, "*ARGENTUM INCENDIA!*"

The silver fire of the spell slammed into Harry's shield with more force than he was using to keep it going. It shattered, sending him flying back and into the railing at the bottom of the stairs. As he collapsed to the ground, his lower back screaming out in pain, the sound of Tonks letting out a shrill cry made him freeze.

It all seemed to be happening in slow motion for him. Harry staggered back upright and turned to look up the stairs. The assembled group was gathered around Tonks, who was now on the ground, thrashing

around as the silver flames burned at her. Lupin seemed to know how to cancel the effects, but it was taking too long. Her skin was starting to burn under its intensity. By the time he had banished the flames away, Tonks was curled up and sobbing, her mother holding her gingerly. Wearing her usual nightshirt left a lot of exposed skin, all of which looked badly blistered.

Harry turned his head to look back into the living room, where one Death Eater on the far side, near the fireplace, was looking smug. Gritting his teeth, Harry whispered, "Balthazar?"

The blue gem on the Gauntlet's back pulsed softly as the ghost replied, "Yes, Harry?"

"First lock. Release it."

"...Are you sure?" Balthazar asked, worry in his voice.

"Release it, Balthazar!" Harry ordered, his eyes glowing again.

Though silence was his only reply, the Gauntlet began to let out a quiet hiss. Harry shambled back toward the doorway into the living room, ignoring the pain in his back. He had allowed himself to get distracted. He had allowed himself to lose focus. What good was all of this power if he was thoroughly incapable of using any of it to keep those around him safe? What good was talking big if he wasn't able to follow through with any of it? What good were promises if all he was going to do was break them?

As the Gauntlet began to glow a bright red, heat generating from it, Balthazar finally answered Harry. "The first lock has been released, Harry. You have five minutes."

Harry shot forward into the room, throwing up another shield to block the incoming spells from the Death Eaters. It only dropped long enough for him to attack. And that amount of time, the Death Eaters would find out, wasn't long enough an opening.

Before the group knew what was happening, three Death Eaters were slumped over, the life already stolen from them. The single undead man between the three let out an ungodly roar as Harry moved

around behind it. As the Death Eaters fired at him, Harry used the creature's body as a secondary shield. The Death Eaters weren't toying with him now - they were shooting to outright kill. One of the shots hit the undead man's head. Harry was quick to avoid the splatter. As the body dropped back to the ground, clawing at the carpet, the Patronus Armor was invoked and Harry vanished.

"Watch your backs!" Growled the Death Eater who had injured Tonks. "And mind the walking corpses! Don't let him get a hold of them and turn them on us!"

The Death Eater nearest him suddenly let out a gurgling cry, dropping to the floor and clutching at his throat. Blood was gushing from it, spilling through his robes and dripping to the floor.

"How can we fight something we can't see, Varges?!" Cried one of the other Death Eaters.

The one in the center, Ashford Varges, narrowed his eyes. "Release the undead and fire at will! One of them has to hit the bastard!"

As commanded, the others released the bonds on the undead that were chained. Only one tried to turn around and kill the one who had been keeping it locked up. It was quickly dispatched. The rest tried to rush out of the room, heading toward the stairs. They got just to the doorway before they slammed into an invisible wall. The undead men and women pounded against it, but they couldn't get through. One tried to turn and go another way, but it hit a second invisible wall. Indeed, all four directions seemed to have them. The undead were effectively boxed in. What's more, it was slowly getting smaller.

"Thank you." Hissed a voice near Varges' ear. "You've saved me the trouble of thinking how to take care of them."

Varges swatted at the air near his ear and whirled around, but the only thing behind him was the fireplace. Eye twitching, he roared, "Fire!"

"Where?!" Asked one of the others.

"Anywhere! Everywhere! Figure out where he's hiding and **KILL HIM!**"

Spells began to fire in random directions throughout the room. The only rule that Varges and his men seemed to follow was not aiming at each other. This ended quickly, however, when Harry suddenly reappeared just behind one of the men, grabbing his wand arm and aiming at his friend that was just beside him at the exact moment he had loosed the Killing Curse. And, as the others turned and shot off various curses and hexes at Harry, he shifted and let the poor bastard he had used take the full brunt of the lot. He dropped to the ground, his eyes lifeless and his body bleeding.

One by one, Harry took the men out. Shifting in and out, he went around the room, picking out targets at random and killing them. The ones without masks went first, as they simply made easier targets. He aimed low as he reappeared, connecting the Invidia Eximo to one man's right knee. Disintegrating the kneecap, the man's lower leg shot across the room as blood sprayed from the upper half. He dropped to the ground, screaming and clutching at his wound as Harry shifted back out.

But as the group collectively turned its attention to the fallen man, Harry had reappeared behind another on the opposite side of the room. Running his wand down the man's back caused him to shriek as he fell forward. If he had been capable of moving after that, Harry was sure that the man would have been trying to pull the series of still-hot bolts from his back. But he had made sure to sever the man's spine in multiple locations. He wouldn't be doing much of anything in the future, providing he survived the night.

"You told me he didn't kill!" Yelled one of the Death Eaters suddenly, turning and aiming his wand at Varges' head.

Varges, whose mask was off now, glared at the other man. "And I told *you* to expect anything!"

"That didn't include this! I'm not going to be slaughtered! AVA--" He didn't get a chance to finish the curse, however, as his head suddenly twisted at a sickening angle. He collapsed to the floor in a heap as Harry reappeared over him.

"Samuel brings up a good point, Potter." Said Varges, smirking at Harry. "Since when *do* you kill so ruthlessly?"

Harry, however, didn't give the man an answer, choosing instead to walk across the room, toward one of the more nervous Death Eaters that remained up. Naturally, he was fired at, but Harry was shifting quickly to get out of the way while keeping up the illusion of natural forward momentum. Suddenly, he moved forward some six feet, quickly closing the gap. The Death Eater, not expecting this, let out a yelp and dropped to the ground, scrambling backwards.

"How did you get in?" Harry asked softly.

"G-get away!" Cried the Death Eater, shakily aiming his wand at Harry. "C-Crucio! **CRUCIO!** Work, damn it, **WORK! CRUCIO!**"

Harry walked back up to the man, who had scooted back into a wall. Kneeling, he whispered, "You can't hurt me, you know. Tell me how you got in and I might show mercy."

"N-never! I'd rather die than tell you!" Spat the man.

"Very well." Harry murmured. The light covering his right arm suddenly vanished as it shot up. Grabbing the Death Eater by the head, the heat from the Gauntlet was enough to cause the man's mask to melt. His screams only lasted as long as it took the molten mask to enter his throat. Standing back up, with the Armor once more encasing his right arm, Harry looked toward Varges and asked, "Will you tell me?"

Varges said nothing. Harry nodded slightly and vanished again. However, before any more of their number could be killed, a strange noise drew their attention back to the doorway where the undead were trapped. The invisible walls boxing them in had started to get smaller at a faster rate. Magical force against creatures whose muscles had long since rotted was an unfair match, one that ended quickly. The box suddenly shrunk to no bigger than a can of soda. There wasn't so much a splattering noise as there was the sound of something simply being crushed into powder.

"Get the Floo Powder! Get us *out* of here, Ash!" Yelled one of the few remaining men. But as the group began to gravitate back toward the fireplace, Harry picked up the pace. The kills that followed were quick and simple. Finally, only Varges remained, his shoes rapidly being stained by the blood of the bodies around him. Varges himself, however, almost seemed resigned to his fate, as he began to laugh.

Harry reappeared in front of him, the Armor fading as he asked, "What's so funny?"

"You're even more out of control than the Dark Lord predicted!" Varges said.

"Oh? I'd say I was rather in control, personally." Harry stated. "Your men can vouch for that."

"The psychotic look in your eyes before you charged, the apathy in your voice as you killed... that's what I mean, Potter." Said Varges, chuckling still. "You'll fall... even if you do kill the Dark Lord, you'll fall and take his place! No one can kill like that and not think they'll escape being swallowed by the darkness!"

"There is no darkness. Just light." Harry stated, stepping closer to Varges, who made no move to attack. "A light strong enough to snuff out anything that dares try to oppose it. Tell me where Voldemort is and you might not have to join your friends."

"And if I refuse?" Asked Varges.

"Then you'll join them in whatever hell you believe in." Harry replied.

Varges closed his eyes and smirked. "Very well..."

At the top of the stairs, those who hadn't taken Tonks off into the closest room to tend to her injuries had been watching Harry slaughter the Death Eaters and undead. Most had been forced to turn away numerous times, wondering if it was really Harry doing those terrible things. Even their enemies hadn't deserved some of the things Harry had done to them. That was how most felt as they watched, flinching each time Harry had shifted back in. Malfoy had been the only one who had watched the entire thing, never looking

away. And while the others knew what was going to happen, only Malfoy would continue watching. And, subsequently, he would be the only other one beside Harry to know how the men had gotten in. When Harry had entered the room, he had erected some kind of invisible wall within it, keeping everything from getting out. A second series of walls had taken care of the poor souls resurrected by Voldemort. But it didn't just keep the Death Eaters and ghouls from escaping. Harry had made sure the room was soundproof, probably to spare those on the stairs from hearing the sounds the dying men were making.

As Varges uttered a single word, Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"...I see." Harry said, his eyes also narrowed.

"So... feel like sparing my life?" Asked Varges, smirking again.

"No." Harry said, bringing the Gauntlet up.

"You said you'd spare me."

"I said I might."

"You wont win, you know."

"How can you be so sure?"

Varges' smirk grew. "We've had a little fun in our collecting."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"You'll see, sooner or later." Varges said. His wand arm suddenly moved, swiftly moving up and aiming at Harry's head. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

But Balthazar had sent Harry a warning the minute the Death Eater had started to move. It gave him just enough time to duck out of the way. The Killing Curse flew past him, slamming harmlessly into the invisible wall guarding the doorway. Slammering the still red-hot Gauntlet into the ground, Harry hissed, "That was a mistake."

As Varges aimed down and started to fire another Killing Curse, Harry raised his right arm up. When Varges fired, Harry was encased by the Armor, moving just to the man's side. Reappearing and dropping the armor, he put the palm of the Gauntlet up against the left side of Varges' head and snarled, "**ARGENTUM INCENDIA!**"

Seconds later, the invisible wall fell and Harry, blood splattered all over his face and robes, walked out. The minute he got to the first step on the stairs, however, his vision went blurry. He fell forward, barely catching himself in time.

"Six." Balthazar said, his voice tense. "You overdid it."

Harry let himself lay uncomfortably against the stairs, his vision starting to go black. "Draco..."

"She'll be alright, Potter." Malfoy said, walking over and kneeling on the step just above the ones Harry was sprawled out on. "She'll be better in a few days, most likely. More importantly, did he say...?"

"Yeah." Harry said. "Yeah. He did."

"...What now?"

"We move." Harry said, his voice getting weak. "Soon as everyone's ready. We... move..."

Seeing Harry go limp, Malfoy sighed and stood back up. Looking up and into the room, he noticed something else; just how horrifying an odor was coming from it. Apparently, Harry's invisible wall had also kept the stench of death and singed flesh from reaching them. Looking over his shoulder, Malfoy looked at the handful of people still standing around and watching events unfold. "Back to your rooms, all of you. I'll bring Potter to my aunt and the werewolf. They can move him from there."

Pansy walked up behind him, holding her nose and grimacing as Malfoy floated Harry into the air. "Draco? What were you talking about? What did that Death Eater say?"

"Potter can tell you just as soon as he's ready." Malfoy said, brushing past the girl. "Right now, you - all of you - would do well in trying to at least rest your eyes until Dumbledore can get here. And be on guard. After all, it's become quite clear that the Order's headquarters has been compromised."

oOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** And now we get a bit of how Harry handles his new power. Paranoia isn't always a bad thing. We can also see properly the effects the Gauntlet is having on him, mentally. A series of self-imposed locks are in place to keep him from seriously injuring himself. The only reason Balthazar allowed him over the time limit was because he wasn't DOING anything for that last minute or so aside from talking to Varges.

Headquarters was invaded somehow and a slew of low-rank Death Eaters and first-generation test subjects were put in the field for the first time. As you can see, they didn't fare very well. The undead were little more than mindless drones that would readily turn on their masters if given the chance. And just because you splatter the undead's head means nothing when the means of resurrection involves necromancy. Until it is fully obliterated or until the one who raised the undead has been killed, they will continue to move.

I'll see you next time, everyone. Summer comes to an end and everyone returns to Hogwarts. But all is not well. Harry's irritation at Dumbledore's continuous waiting comes to an end and the hunt for Voldemort's base of operations will begin.

## Chapter 6 – The New Order

When Tonks finally woke up, Harry was by her side. He hadn't suffered any physical wounds, but he had severely drained his magical reserves. Fortunately, those hadn't taken too long to refill themselves. Once they had, Harry had gone to be with Tonks, vowing not to leave until she woke up. It took two days before the effects of the spells and potions that had been used on her wore off. Her skin, while not fully back to looking normal, was on its way there. Lupin and the others had taken action quickly enough that there would be no permanent damage.

"Nn..." Tonks groaned, finally stirring one morning. She let out a quiet whimper and went to put a pillow over her eyes. "Bright..."

"Hi there." Harry whispered, leaning forward in his chair. "How're you feeling, Nym?"

"Sore..."

"I'm sorry. If I hadn't lost my concentration, that spell never would have gotten through."

Tonks lifted the pillow enough to shoot Harry a stern, if a bit groggy, look. "Harry James Potter, don't you start. We all saw him fire that thing. You would've had trouble blocking it if you *had* been watching him." She paused and looked down at herself. "...Yeah, looks like I'm not some horribly-scarred mutant, so what are you apologizing for?"

Harry glanced away. "You might not have any scars, but you were still hurt because of me."

Letting the pillow fall back over her eyes, Tonks reached out and grabbed at one of Harry's hands. "Wouldn't be the first time, dear. The important thing is that there's no lasting harm caused from it. Yes, it hurt. Yes, I feel like crap right now. But I'll get better. Not like my body was so badly burned that I can never wear shorts again, yeah? So stop pouting about me getting hurt."

"I'm not pouting." Grumbled Harry, squeezing Tonks' hand.

"Sure you aren't, Harry." Tonks giggled quietly. She groaned as her body made her stretch. "Mmph... okay, still kinda tender. ...Hey, how long until school starts?"

"Too soon. Think you'll be good to go?"

"Of course. Might have to move a bit slower at first, but I'll get back to normal soon enough." Tonks said. "So what happened after I was hit?"

Harry paused before replying. "I... took care of them. I'm glad you weren't awake to see it."

"What did you do to them?"

"They're still trying to get the living room clean." Harry murmured. "I'm not especially proud of what I did."

"You did what you had to." Tonks said, lifting the pillow up again. "...You okay?"

"Physically or mentally?"

"Both."

Harry sighed. "I guess so. Still a little drained. Still in a bit of a funk. When I saw you get hit... when I heard you screaming like that, something just... snapped, I guess."

"He over-exerted himself. He collapsed shortly after finishing the leader of the pack. Draco Malfoy brought him in here. After the other adults were finished ensuring your safety, they set him up in the nearest empty room since they were unable to open his bedroom door." Said Balthazar, the blue gemstone pulsing as he spoke.

"Stop fighting so hard you have to spend three days asleep, jackass." Tonks said, smacking his hand. "How many times have you *done* that, anyway?"

"Seems like every time." Harry said, making a face. "Anyway, the important thing is that you're alright. With the Philosopher's Stone, I'm

not at any danger if my magical reserves drop that sharply. Balthazar will always cut off the flow of magic if he thinks I'm overdoing it and the Stone will assist in healing any wounds and replenishing my magic once I'm resting."

"Isn't gonna stop me from worryin', ya know." Tonks said, finally resting her head on top of the pillow she had had covering her eyes.

"I know."

"Come here."

"What?"

"Come here." Tonks repeated, rolling her eyes. "Lean over."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but did as he was told. When he was close enough, Tonks lifted her head enough to give him a quick kiss.

"There." She stated, smiling up at him as her head hit the pillow again.

"Any particular reason for that?" Harry asked, tilting his head.

"Not really. Just felt like making you know I'm not going to mysteriously stop loving you just because I didn't sidestep a spell." Tonks said. "Otherwise, you'd end up writing terrible poetry and use your Metamorphmagus powers to get an emo haircut. Next thing you know, you and Malfoy would start a band called the Intolerable Ponces and tour Britain to depress the youth of today."

Harry snorted. "'The youth of today'? Nymmy, are you sure you're feeling alright?"

Closing her eyes, Tonks grinned. "Nope. They must've given me a lot of potions. I'm feelin' pretty loopy, actually. Kinda fun, but very tiring. Think I'm gonna take a little nap. You don't have to sit with me, you know."

"I know." Harry said, scooting his chair closer to the bed.

"You'd better be eating." Tonks murmured.

"I am. Pansy's making sure of that." Harry said. "She's brought me up meals and stands there and glares at me if I don't make a motion to at least start eating."

Tonks snorted. "I'll have to thank her for ensuring you don't waste away. You're already scrawny, Potter. Don't get so thin you blow away in a strong breeze."

"Oi oi." Harry muttered, looking down at himself. "Not scrawny..."

"Your ribs are clearly visible when your shirt's off. You're scrawny, boy. Don't argue. I'm a woman, and women are always right." Tonks declared.

Rolling his eyes, Harry just settled for getting comfortable in the chair again. His grip on Tonks' hand remained as the girl began drifting off again. "Yes, ma'am."

oOoOoOoOoOo

On the train ride to Hogwarts, everyone noticed that Harry seemed to be rather worn out. He had looked that way ever since waking up that morning. He said he knew the reason, but wasn't quite ready to tell them. He assured them he was fine, however, saying that he and Balthazar were testing something. Balthazar had confirmed this and everyone had seemed rather content in believing it. In reality, Harry wasn't lying to them, he just wasn't being entirely truthful, either. He had deployed a second light clone to follow somebody the first chance he had found. Keeping up one for extended periods was fine. Two, however, was quite draining. Especially since the second was very far away at the moment.

Tonks' skin had all but returned to normal now. There were a few patches of skin still healing from the silver fire, but those spots were all on the lower parts of her legs, where clothing could easily hide them. When they had left Number Twelve that day, the living room was finally cleaned and no trace of Harry's fight had taken place. Harry knew that Dumbledore had collected a few bits and pieces from the carnage before it was cleaned up, however. Some of the powder left behind from destroying the walking dead and a few articles picked

off of the dead Death Eaters. So far, he hadn't done anything with them. At least, not to Harry's knowledge.

"So why are we returning?" Malfoy finally asked, looking over at Harry instead of staring out the window. "I thought we had a job to do."

"We do. We'll leave tomorrow morning. We'll drop by Number Twelve from there. Draco, I want you to go to where you stowed our gear and grab that for me once there." Harry said, cracking an eye open long enough to reply to the blonde.

"And after that?" Asked Pansy.

"After that, we travel. As far as I can manage. I'm probably going to be sleeping more than normal for the next month or so..." Harry muttered. "I'm not looking forward to it. But what alternative do we have? Albus won't do anything. The Minister is incapable of doing anything, even if he means well. Our two main options are out. So we're going it alone."

"I take it you're following the traitor." Malfoy said.

"Yeah. That's why I'm so bloody tired." Harry said, pushing himself away from the wall and rubbing his cheek. "Mmph. Been leaning too long..."

"I'm surprised. At this hour?" Malfoy murmured to himself, looking back out the window. "It doesn't seem right."

"It doesn't." Agreed Harry. "But it's true. Guys, if my head suddenly slams onto the table at dinner tonight, would you kindly tote me to the Pit?"

"Will do." Tonks said, rolling her eyes.

"What about Stargazer?" Asked Luna.

"We're leaving him behind. Draco, I want you to tell your friend Zabini about the Pit. If the twins can't get to the school in time - I've talked to them about what the best course of action to take is in case Hogwarts does get attacked while we're gone - then I want him to be able to

lead the staff and students to safety." Harry said. "Do you think he'll go for it?"

"He should. Blaise's heart's in the right place. He just lacks a lot of determination at times. But if it comes down to it, he'll be more than capable. I'll talk to him once I see him." Said Malfoy.

"Thanks. I wouldn't do this normally, but we need *someone* minding the place while we're away. And if you and Pansy trust him, I see no reason why I shouldn't as well. I'm not expecting him to be *my* friend, mind you. But if you two ask, he should be fine with the plan." Harry said. "...Speaking of 'friends,' our traitor just got back into the country."

"Oh? Where is the bastard?" Asked Malfoy.

"With Albus." Harry said, flexing the fingers on his right hand slowly.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry drummed his fingers on the Ravenclaw table as first year students were called up to be Sorted. Meaningless. It was completely meaningless. And it was meaningless for more than one reason. Breaking students up into groups with such contrast made no sense. When Harry had been younger, he wouldn't have thought that. But the older he got, the less sense it made. Why Sort students at all? Why not just allow them to be students? There was no point to it aside from putting aside Quidditch teams and the equally insipid House points system.

"You're too tense." Murmured Tonks, rubbing at one of Harry's shoulders. "Stop thinking so much, Harry..."

Harry let out a noise somewhere between a grunt and a sigh in response, keeping his eyes focused on the spot just behind Dumbledore; the spot his light clone was lurking. The other was just up the staff table, looming behind its target as well. Closing his right eye, Harry focused on the first of the two creatures. Immediately, he was fed a view of what it was seeing, as though it was some sort of magical camera. Blowing out a low growl, Harry switched to the second. It took a concentrated effort not to have it shift back in and

kill the man sitting less than a foot away. That wouldn't do. Not here, not now.

Opening his eye again, Harry crossed his arms on the table and lowered his head. He felt Tonks' hand on his back, her thumb moving comfortingly. The muscles in his shoulders loosened ever so slightly, but he was still tensed up. As Dumbledore stood to give his usual start-of-term gibberish, Harry bit down on his lower lip as hard as he could. The blood that trickled out gave him something to focus on. Something other than initiating his plans then and there. He would do this properly. He would give them all a show they would never forget. But now was not the time.

"You sure you're alright?" Whispered Tonks, leaning over.

"Hogwarts never felt claustrophobic to me before today." Harry said, lifting his head slightly. "Being here when I don't want to be, forced to go through the same old motions when I should be en route to Germany... it isn't right. Look at him. He's carrying on as though nothing was wrong in the world. He's essentially telling the young ones that everything will be okay within these walls. We both know that's a lie. Nothing about Hogwarts is safe. It's a big risk to leave them in Albus' care. He can't protect anyone, but he acts as though he can. I just hope he's a good enough actor to keep everyone alive until I get rid of Riddle."

"Wanna cut out early?" Tonks asked. "C'mon, we'll go stretch out in bed and relax. It'll do us both some good to unwind. Tomorrow's not going to do anything to lower anyone's stress levels."

"...Maybe you're right, Nym." Harry said, sitting back up properly and looking aside at his currently silver-haired girlfriend. "After all, I can always see what's going on in here if it really starts to bother me. Let's go."

Tonks and Harry got up from the table and headed for the door. Unfortunately, Dumbledore was still speaking. And, seeing the two heading out, he transitioned from his talk about how all products from the Weasley twins' shop were forbidden into asking Harry where he was going.

"To lay down." Harry said, glancing over his shoulder. "I'm not feeling well."

"Oh? Perhaps you should go see Madam Pomfrey, then." Dumbledore said.

"Perhaps." Harry agreed, turning and slipping out the doors, Tonks close behind him. Once out, he added quietly, "Or perhaps I should go see Riddle. One last night at school. I'm almost sad to have to leave it behind in this way, Nym. I won't have a proper graduation. After all the crap I've gone through to keep this place safe, it just doesn't feel right."

"The school's handled worse than this. She'll do fine once we leave." Tonks said, smiling over at Harry as they walked. "But you're right. It feels odd just... leaving like this. I know the school itself isn't alive, but..."

"Sometimes it feels that way. Yeah. I'm trying to make myself believe that if it comes to it, the school itself will help keep everyone safe." Harry said, letting his hand brush against the stone wall next to him. "Barring that, Zabini and Stargazer should be able to help keep everyone out of harm's way long enough for backup to arrive."

"A lot of what-ifs to this." Tonks murmured.

"A lot of them." Harry agreed, nodding slowly. "And a lot of things that could go wrong. But if I don't act now, more will start to appear. If Voldemort's only to the point where the corpses he brings back are mindless slaves, we may yet stand a chance. But if I were to stay here all year..."

"He'd end up marching on Hogwarts, bringing a slew of properly raised undead with him." Tonks finished.

"Yeah. I'm not looking forward to our trip at all. Never thought this would be how I'd leave the country for the first time." Harry said, laughing mirthlessly. "I just... I dunno, I just hope I'm good enough to back up all of what I've said."

"Second guessing yourself?" Asked Tonks.

"I go through potential scenarios in my head. What happens if I win, what happens if I lose, what happens if something unexpected arises... I've gone through so many hypothetical situations in my head, you'd think I'd have things mapped out at least fairly well. But I have no idea what I'm going to do once there. Obviously, I can't just lay waste to wherever Riddle's hiding. He's going to have his highest-ranking Death Eaters with him. I'd reason it's safe to assume he'll also have some form of creatures guarding himself, his men, and whatever projects they're all running. It's a lot for one small group to deal with."

"Which is why you want to try and find Wagner." Tonks said.

"Yeah. I'm starting to piece a few things together. The trouble is *finding* him, providing he's even anywhere near where I plan to set us down." Harry said, moving through the invisible wall that led to the stairs outside the Pit. Greeting the little snake on the door, he opened it and the two of them entered. It was spotless as ever, no doubt thanks to Dobby and the other house elves tapped to clean the place regularly.

Tonks peered up at the hole in the ceiling. "Stargazer? Are you in there?"

An eye stalk poked out a moment later. "Ahh... you're back."

"Bored without someone to talk to?" Asked Harry, walking over.

The little beholder floated out of his room, hovering around Harry's eye level. "Oh, not at all. The creatures that help clean this place and bring me my food are quite interesting. And very talkative if one managed to stop them from their cleaning duties. Since I cannot exactly go parading around the school, they bring me news of the outside world. Apparently, not all is good. And a few have reported seeing a strange, white creature lurking around the headmaster."

"Ah yes, they *would* be able to see..." Harry said, cocking his head. "That would be my doing. I think this may take awhile to explain in full. I need to talk to you anyway, though. Come on, let's move over to the couch. I wanna sit somewhere comfortable and try to unwind. I'll fill you in on my plans for this year."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

The following morning, Harry was up before the sun. There were a lot of things that needed to get done in a short timeframe. But he had to do one thing in particular before he went about his business at Hogwarts. Changing into the clothing he had ordered, Harry slipped quietly out of the Pit's bedroom. Stargazer poked an eye stalk out of his room as Harry drew closer to it. A quick, soft-spoken set of instructions later and the beholder disappeared into the darkness once more. Closing his eyes, Harry let himself be engulfed by the light of the Patronus Armor. There was somewhere he needed to be. There was someone he needed to talk to. His destination was hundreds of miles away and, even traveling along the magical currents, it took him nearly twenty minutes before he reached it.

He landed quietly and shifted back in, dropping the Armor right away. It was a chilly morning with quite a lot of wind, causing him to let out a shudder. Glancing down, he murmured, "Hope this isn't a bad omen."

Harry paused, almost as if expecting a response, before nodding and stepping forward. Removing his glasses, he set them on top of a tombstone before kneeling beside it. "We're leaving today, Leon. I'm leaving my glasses in your care while I'm away. It's only fitting, after all. Your life and my glasses represent a time when things were simpler. Back before things began to spiral out of control. I don't know if I can win, Leon. But if I go down, I'll take him out with me."

Another pause followed, with Harry staring as Solieyu's grave, a frown on his face. "I guess I'm here because I needed someone to listen. Listen, but not say anything. Everyone's coming with me, of course. I'll do all I can to keep them safe. Until we get out of their grasp, it's going to be dangerous travel. I don't know what Albus plans to do, but I'm sure we'll be followed at least once."

Letting his hand brush the side of the tombstone, Harry smiled. "Things got a lot more complicated after you left. It's now or never, y'know? If I can't stop Voldemort in Germany, chances are I never will. I'm not going to get any stronger at this point. I've hit my peak, in a way. With the Gauntlet, I can finally regulate all the power I could

possibly need. I pray that's enough to stop him. Him and whatever else may be guarding him."

Harry closed his eyes and got to his feet, sliding his hands into his pockets. Walking around in front of Solieu's grave, he asked, "Do you think I'm in over my head, Leon? Do you think I'm just being silly? That I'm rushing in unprepared?" He let out a sigh, shaking his head slowly. "I wish I could find some answers. But everywhere I turn, I get more questions. I guess that's why I'm here. I guess that's why I was put into Ravenclaw. Problems get laid out before me and I'm left to solve them. I know you're watching, Leon. So wish me luck. I need to get out of here soon if I want to get everything set in motion before classes start."

Taking a step back, Harry smiled sadly. "You're lucky, Leon. You get to rest. I guess... when all of this is over, I can as well. Until then... take good care of my glasses. I won't need them where I'm going."

Closing his eyes, Harry let the Armor wrap around him again, blocking the chill morning winds. He stood silently in front of his friend's grave for another few minutes before quietly shifting and heading back to the school.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Everyone gathered an hour before breakfast to go over the plans again. After returning, Harry had sat, eyes closed and completely motionless, on the couch. Tonks woke up not long after he returned, with everyone else filtering in shortly thereafter. Once he was sure everyone was there, he had asked about Blaise Zabini. Malfoy told him that he had given his friend explicit instructions on where the Pit was located and how to get in. He then pulled out a photograph of his friend for Stargazer to burn into memory.

Getting up, Harry excused himself to the bedroom for a few minutes to get changed. Everyone had a small pack of clothing bundled up and shrunk down in their pockets for the journey ahead of them. When Harry came back out, he looked and sounded completely different than he had when he had gone in. His movements had been sluggish, his voice almost sad. No one had asked where his glasses

were, as most had assumed them to still be in the bedroom. When he came back out, still not wearing them, Pansy had asked.

"I left them with Leon." Harry said, one corner of his mouth turning up faintly. "He's the only one I trust them with. Come on. Let's go."

His movements were precise now, his voice authoritative. He was set to execute his plans come hell or high water. And, as everyone left the Pit, they all had the same question running through their minds: Would they ever return to see it again?

Ocean blue robes with a cloak billowing behind him as he led his pack towards the Great Hall, Harry smiled. He smiled because if he didn't, he would end up faltering. And he couldn't afford to show any weakness. Not now. He had purposely waited until after breakfast had started to set his plans in motion. He wanted the entire school to bear witness to what he was about to say and do. He wanted everyone to know exactly why he and his friends were abandoning Hogwarts.

The air around Harry became magically charged as he strode toward the large double doors leading to the Great Hall. Holding his arms out as he approached them, they let out a groan before swinging open of their own accord. Harry came to a stop just inside the room, his friends lining up behind him.

"Good morning, everyone." Harry stated, emerald eyes sparkling.  
"And goodbye."

At the staff table, Dumbledore stood up. Though his leadership skills had been called into question on more than one occasion as of late, Harry knew the man wasn't stupid. He knew that something was up the moment those doors had opened. The fact that Harry was wearing such a different outfit had to have tipped the scales in the direction of suspicion.

"Goodbye, Harry? Are you planning on going somewhere other than class today?" Asked Dumbledore, his tone light.

Holding his arms out to his sides, Harry laughed. "Surely you can't be that foolish, Albus! You should know very well where I plan to go." His

arms fell to his sides as he glared across the large room. He was wearing contacts now. And, if one were to get close enough to see them, they had a pair of ouroboros circling his irises. Currently, they were circling slowly, each in a different direction. "I'm leaving this place, Albus. I'm going to Germany. I'm bringing the fight to Voldemort and I'm going to twist him out of reality itself!"

"I was afraid you would attempt something like this." Dumbledore said, his voice taking on a sadder tone. "I cannot allow you to leave, Harry."

"You cannot allow it?" Harry repeated, eyebrows raising as he reached into his robes. Pulling out a small, nondescript pen, he began to walk again. "You don't have a *choice* anymore. You have no control over me anymore, Albus. You cannot keep your trump card under your watchful gaze any longer. And do you know why? Because I've finally outmaneuvered you. And before I go, I'll have everyone in this room questioning how fit a leader you really are."

Twirling the pen between his fingers, Harry suddenly came to a halt halfway up the House tables. "Let me ask all of you something." He said, looking around at his fellow students. "How many of you think you know the headmaster? How many of you think he can keep you safe? How many of your parents blindly follow everything he says? I'm sure a lot of you heard my interview on WWN over the summer. I'm sure you've had time to sit on that discussion and think about all I said. I think no matter what conclusion you reached then, you'll soon be agreeing with me."

Turning suddenly, Harry slammed the pen down onto the closest table, startling a pair of fourth year boys. Pulling Cedric's wand, Harry aimed it at the pen. And, with a blast of white light, it had changed into a small bowl. One filled with something that resembled lazily swirling silver liquid. Looking up at the staff table again, Harry was pleased to see Dumbledore looking tense. Smiling, he asked, "Tell me, headmaster... were you aware I've been spying on you for a good couple weeks now?"

"What?" Said Dumbledore, brow creasing.

Harry grinned and snapped his fingers. Immediately, the light clone behind Dumbledore shifted back in, actually managing to catch the old wizard off guard for the briefest of moments. The clone shifted again, reappearing next to Harry. And, as the two touched, the light clone vanished, reabsorbed back into Harry's magical pool. Bringing his wand up, Harry smiled for a moment before touching the side of his head and extracting a memory.

"Harry, what are you doing?" Dumbledore asked.

"Are you all aware," Harry began again, ignoring the headmaster, "That Dumbledore is all too willing to sacrifice each and every one of you if it meant keeping his own twisted sense of justice?"

"I think no such thing." Stated the headmaster, watching the extracted memory with something akin to vaguely-concealed panic behind his eyes.

"Don't you now?" Harry cooed, lowering the memory into the transformed pensieve. Tapping the side, a scene began to play out over the small bowl.

It showed Dumbledore sitting at his desk, head in his hands. It was a fresh memory, one from this very morning. Sheer chance had delivered this gem to Harry, and he wasn't about to waste it. Moments later, a disembodied voice called out, "Albus?"

The image of Dumbledore looked up and off to one side. Moments later, he got up and walked over to his fireplace, the flames of which were glowing a ghostly blue in the memory. Kneeling, he saw the face of Rufus Scrimgeour looking back at him. "Good morning, Rufus. To what do I owe such an early call?"

"Just curious as to how the school year began. I didn't feel right calling last night." Said Scrimgeour.

"Troubling, as I worried they would be. Harry and Miss Tonks left early. Harry claimed to not feel good..."

"But you don't believe it?" Asked Scrimgeour.

"I did not then and I do not now." Dumbledore said. "He had that faraway look in his eyes again. The one that lets me know he's got a lot on his mind that he's having difficulty working out. With things being as they have lately, I do not like to entertain the thought of what could be going through his head. I am worried that he is planning to leave."

"I see." Scrimgeour replied. "I assume it's fruitless to try and stop him. So why not send him some support?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Send him backup, Albus. Reach out to him. Show him you haven't abandoned him *or* the fight against Voldemort. Let him know you're still willing to fight." Scrimgeour said.

"Even if I do not believe this to be the correct course of action?" Dumbledore asked.

"Albus, we both know the boy is right. His methods might not be, but his heart's in the right place."

"As is mine."

Scrimgeour let out a frustrated sigh. "Yes, but he's right on one important thing, Albus. You aren't *doing* anything!"

"The Order is scouting Lord Voldemort's encampments as we speak." Said Dumbledore.

"Yes. Always watching, never acting. Do you plan to have an extended turtling match against him, Albus? A war of attrition that falls merely to how many each side can rally? I know you better than that. At least, I thought I did. Why are you delaying the attack, Albus? If Harry was only right about a single thing, it's the fact that attacking sooner means fighting Voldemort on *our* terms. He'll be weaker, he'll have fewer supporters, and we'll stand a better chance at beating him."

"I cannot abandon this school or the people who look to me for guidance." Said Dumbledore.

"And what if Harry fails, Albus? What then? What if the school gets targeted?"

"Those who survive such an attack will relocate and plan our next move. We will strike back when we can." Dumbledore stated.

Scrimgeour was silent for almost a minute. "Those who survive? You make it sound like only a handful are strong enough to even defend it."

"There will be no defense, Rufus." Dumbledore stated. "We can merely attempt to evacuate. I cannot stop an entire army by myself. And though I trust my staff greatly, I would not put them at risk."

"And the children, Albus? What of them?" Asked Scrimgeour.

"We will save as many as we can, Rufus. But we will not slow for them. Ensuring that we can live to fight another day is more important." Dumbledore stated.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from you." Scrimgeour said, anger finally rising in his voice. "Tell me I didn't just hear you state that the lives of the children in that school aren't worth a damn thing. **Please** tell me I didn't hear that!"

"I cannot do that." Dumbledore said, sounding very tired.

"...You've changed, Albus." Scrimgeour said. "The man I thought I knew would never allow anyone to be put in harm's way simply to ensure his own safety. The man I thought I knew wouldn't let anyone be put in harm's way just to try making things easier."

"I have no choice, Rufus." Dumbledore argued. "I must do what I think is right, even if it means sacrificing every student in Hogwarts to do so."

The two wizards fell silent after that. And, shortly thereafter, the memory died out. As it came to an end, Harry tapped the bowl with a Gauntlet-clad finger, changing it back into a pen, which he promptly pocketed again. Looking around the room, which had been stunned into silence, Harry asked quietly, "How many of you still believe your

precious Albus Dumbledore is the saint he made himself out to be? Let me tell you what I know. I know that Voldemort is in Germany right now. I know he's trying to do something involving necromancy to raise an army of the undead to replace the Dementors I rendered extinct. And someone named Sergei Wagner, a lich apparently of some renown, is involved in some capacity or another."

Turning his back on the staff table, Harry started walking back towards his friends. Only then did Dumbledore see the giant, white ouroboros on the back of Harry's cloak. "Albus' time leading the Order of the Phoenix is going to come to an end shortly. My own Order will replace and surpass it. My Order will act aggressively in hunting Voldemort down - I know the location of his main encampment thanks to our dear Professor Snape..."

Snape froze at this. He recovered remarkably fast, however, and got to his feet. "Potter, what in the devil do you--"

But he never got a chance to finish his sentence. Harry had let out a soft whistle and, just as the first light clone had shifted in from behind Dumbledore, the second appeared behind Snape. It brushed past the Potions Master, giving the shocked man a menacing grin before shifting across the room and rejoining with Harry, who smirked.

"Phoenixes symbolize one type of eternal return - one dominated by repeating one's mistakes over and over endlessly. My Order, dominated by the ouroboros, will break that cyclical nature. The same goals in a different light; one unclouded by age and faulty judgement. My Order will succeed where his Order has failed. And if he doesn't step down right now, I'll leave all of you to your fates."

"Would you truly abandon those you want to protect, Harry?" Asked Dumbledore.

"I'm tired of waiting." Harry replied, turning to face the headmaster again. "The fact that we had to go back to school, rather than hanging back to gear up in order to fight Voldemort, was enough to tell me what I needed to know. You still want me under your command."

"I cannot accept the offer to step down, Harry. Too many still depend on me." Dumbledore said.

"So be it, then." Whispered Harry, closing his eyes for a moment. Turning, he looked at his friends. "We're leaving."

"Potter." Malfoy said, looking over Harry's shoulder.

Turning, Harry found the headmaster had drawn his wand and was aiming it across the Great Hall at him. A look of sorrow in his eyes, Dumbledore asked, "Do you really wish for this to happen?"

"Do you think you could get the spell off before I ended your life?" Asked Harry. And, as he finished speaking, ninety-eight wands came spinning into existence throughout the room, all of them aiming at Dumbledore.

The headmaster looked at them slowly. The wands Harry had been given for the forging process. He had gained control of them, most likely either keeping them hidden within the same pocket realm the house elves traveled within or simply keeping them camouflaged. Either way, Dumbledore knew he wouldn't be able to survive that kind of attack. Even if the rest of the staff jumped to his aid, the sheer force he knew Harry would likely put behind the strikes would send them back into the wall. A defeated look in his eyes, Dumbledore slowly lowered his arm.

"Your chance is now gone." Harry said, the wands spinning quickly before fading away again. And, turning his back on the Great Hall once again, he murmured, "Goodbye. The next time you see me will be when Voldemort has been erased from existence."

Harry held his hands out. And, one by one, his friends moved in to get close enough. Once they had, the Patronus Armor encased all of them. Seconds later, the group was gone, leaving a full, deathly silent room in their wake.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** The summer has over, a new school year has begun, and already Harry has left. The desire to contain Voldemort and minimize the terror he can cause has become the driving force in his life now. And now that he's of age and in full control of his magic, that's exactly what he's going to do.

Join us next time when we see what Harry has in store and how he plans to get himself and his friends from Hogwarts to Germany.

And I promise - they won't be camping for half of MY book 7.

## Chapter 7 – All Is One

The group touched down in the kitchen of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. Naturally, their arrival caused those already there to give a start. Specifically, Andromeda and Lupin were surprised to see them there. After removing the Patronus Armor from the group and letting them get their bearings again, Harry began to give orders.

"Draco, go get our supplies. Nym, head up to our room and get the flask. Hermione, do you still have the list I gave you?"

"Of course." Replied the bushy-haired Gryffindor.

"Then head for the library and stock up. Pick up anything you might want to read as well. We'll be out there for an indeterminate amount of time. Cabin fever setting in is the last thing I plan to let happen." Harry said.

"What's the password to the door?" Asked Tonks.

Harry pulled her close and whispered something in her ear. She and the other two then left the kitchen to gather what had been asked. Harry blew out a sigh and turned to face the Order members who had been watching them with confusion. His eyes stopped on Andromeda. "I hope you can guess what this is about."

"I doubt Albus just decided to let you go off on your own." Andromeda said, crossing her arms.

"Yeah. Which is why we're going it alone. We're just here to get our gear." Harry said.

"You think I'm going to let you leave?" Andromeda asked.

"You think you can stop us?" Harry asked. "I'm done waiting. With or without Albus' aid, my Order is going to be doing something. So while our dear headmaster sits in his office, waiting for doomsday to come knocking, we'll be in Germany hunting down the Grim Reaper himself. Whether we succeed or not is irrelevant. We're trying. That's more than I can say for Albus."

"And just how do you plan to get there? You don't know where he is." Lupin said.

"Same way we got here. I'll be shifting and transporting the group. It's draining. We won't be able to go far with each jump, but it'll be far enough. I'll need a good bit of luck with some heavy magic management - if there are no snags - to keep myself healthy and advancing at a steady pace. It's not the best plan in the world, but it's the only feasible one I have. As for how I know, you can thank Snape for that. He let those Death Eaters in. I put a clone on him, just as I did to Dumbledore. I know *exactly* where Voldemort's tutled down in."

"Severus let them in?" Lupin said, frowning slightly. "Hm..."

While Lupin pondered the situation, Andromeda stepped forward. "I won't allow this, Harry. You may be of age, but my daughter isn't. She isn't going."

"You think you'd be able to prevent her from it? I'd love to see you try." Harry said. "I need all the help I can get. And if I'm spending all of my time worrying about Nym, I'll get myself killed. I need her there with me so I can keep her safe."

"Be that as it may, she *isn't* going, Harry."

"That kind of thinking is why people keep dying." Harry said, shaking his head. "Dumbledore's refusal to do anything other than watch. People not acting for fear that something will come of it. That attacking might cause swift retribution. But what does sitting around get us? You saw what I left of those Death Eaters, Andromeda. You saw how badly burned Nym was. Do you really want to hear her screaming again?"

"No, and that's exactly why she's not going with you!" Andromeda yelled.

Malfoy re-entered the room, carrying a shrunk box with him. "Got the tents, Potter."

"Good." Harry said, nodding as he glanced over his shoulder. "Pocket them for now. I'll see if I can't work out a better method of keeping them safe after the jump." Looking back at Andromeda, he continued, "Sirius is dead because Dumbledore refused to do anything. This house was attacked because Dumbledore trusts Snape. Snape's indirectly responsible for Nym getting hurt. I outted that little secret in front of the entire Great Hall, along with Dumbledore stating quite clearly that he was fully willing to sacrifice everyone at that school if it meant sticking to his guns. I'd be more than happy to show the memory to you as well. I still have the pensieve on me."

"That won't be necessary, Harry." Lupin said, putting a hand on Andromeda's shoulder as he moved past her. Smiling in a tired way, he murmured, "You look strange without your glasses."

"Leon's keeping them safe." Harry said.

"I see. Harry, I know we can't stop you. No matter what we may think, we know you're doing this for the greater good." Lupin said.

"I'm glad someone feels that way." Harry muttered.

"Be careful out there. I assume you aren't just going to go charging toward Voldemort's base of operations directly."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I flipped through a few books I ordered on the region. The whole area's one giant forest. There are a few places that I thought I'd scout out. I know there's an old church out in the middle of nowhere that's near where Voldemort's camp is. Supposedly, some knights from long ago used it as a place of worship. Dunno what condition it's in, but an actual building would protect us more than these tents you guys use on your missions for Albus."

"Indeed. At least they're top-notch, though." Lupin said. "Where did you get them, anyway? The last three were taken by the last group who left."

"Potter thought to nick these at the end of the last school year." Malfoy said, smirking. "He was thinking ahead. Good thing, too."

Hermione came back, looking pleased with herself. "I found all of them, Harry."

"Excellent! Pick up any light reading for yourself?" Asked Harry, turning around.

"Oh, a few things. Something to read around bedtime." Hermione said.

"You've got half the Black family library in your robes. Admit it." Pansy said.

Hermione glared aside at the Slytherin girl. "I most certainly do *not*. I borrowed three books and I intend to keep good care of them, thank you."

Luna looked up at the ceiling for a moment before asking, "Do you think Nymphadora is having any trouble getting into your bedroom, Harry?"

"Shouldn't be. I left the password in english just before we left for King's Cross." Said Harry. "She might be having trouble finding where I hid the damn thing, though. Last thing I wanted was for Ginny's mother to find it."

"I still don't know why you're bringing a flask." Ginny said. "Planning to get drunk at night to help yourself unwind?"

"Hardly. Got a bit of something special in it I may need." Harry replied, grinning. "I'll tell you after we make the jump." He looked back to Andromeda and, after pausing for a moment, walked over to her. "Look, I know you're mad at me. I know you don't want Nym to go. But I'll take care of her. I promise."

"That isn't the point, Harry. I don't want any of you going off on your own." Andromeda said.

"I wish we didn't have to. But we do. Albus won't provide help." Harry said. "She'll be safer with me than she would at Hogwarts. I've got the power to protect them. I also don't plan to let myself get *distracted* anymore. If it comes to it, I'll readily give my life to keep hers safe."

That's the difference between myself and Albus. It's why he shouldn't be allowed to lead anyone anymore. He's too afraid of getting killed himself. That's why he doesn't go anywhere on his own anymore, despite knowing his very presence would make any enemy he faced down lose confidence in themselves. After all, what hope could a simple Death Eater have against the legendary Albus Dumbledore. I'm hoping that presence ensures Hogwarts' safety until everyone gets back."

Tonks finally returned, a small, silver flask clutched in her right hand. She smacked Harry on the back of the head as she got near. And while he yelped and rubbed the spot he had been hit, he asked, "The hell was *that* for?!"

"Hiding this in my underwear drawer." Tonks scowled, blushing faintly.

"She wouldn't have looked there!" Harry argued.

"You jury-rigged a special compartment for it to hide in anyway!" Tonks countered. "Why couldn't you have used your own?!"

"Less easy on the eyes, dear." Harry said, plucking the flask from Tonks' hand and motioning for everyone to get near him again. Tonks was giving him the evil eye as she stepped up beside him, but everyone else seemed to be in high spirits.

Harry looked at Tonks for a second before sighing. "Go give your mother a hug."

"What?"

"You won't be seeing her for awhile. Go give her a hug or something." Harry said, looking off.

Tonks tilted her head, but nodded. She went over to Andromeda and did as she was told, suddenly finding herself held tightly. "...Mum?"

"I can't stop you, apparently." Andromeda said, laughing weakly. "And he's said he'll protect you, but..."

"...I know. I'm sorry." Tonks said, squeezing her mother softly. "We'll be alright, though. Try not to worry too much?"

"Can't help it." Andromeda said, letting go of her daughter and stepping back. Wiping at her eyes, she nodded toward the group. "Go on. If Albus comes by, we'll say we haven't seen you."

"Thank you." Harry said, his voice quiet as Tonks took her place beside him again.

"Good luck, Harry." Lupin said, rubbing at Andromeda's back slowly.

Harry smirked, the Armor creeping up around his limbs. "This is what I've been raised for. They'll all be fine. I'll see you in a few months, if all goes well."

"And if it doesn't?" Asked Andromeda, her voice barely audible.

Harry smiled sadly at her in reply. "Then you'll be seeing everyone but me in a few months."

"Everyone but you?" Repeated Andromeda. "What do you mean?"

Closing his eyes, the Armor engulfed the small group, which promptly disappeared without a sound. Andromeda stared at the spot they had been, still frowning. "Remus?"

"I don't know what he meant, either." Lupin said, looking troubled. "I don't like the sound of it, though." He ran a hand back through his hair and sighed, looking around at the others in the room. "Alright, you lot. I know I said we wouldn't tell anyone, but I'm hoping the rest of you will follow our lead."

And, as Lupin began a rapidfire speech on what they were all going to say, Andromeda went to sit at the table. At this rate, she thought, sighing miserably, she was going to end up surpassing Lupin in terms of grey hair.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry collapsed to his knees as the group landed again. He clutched at his chest and started coughing violently for a few seconds before he was able to get a good breath in. "Ohh... okay, this isn't going to be fun..."

"You alright?" Asked Tonks, kneeling beside him.

"Not sure. Whole right side of my body hurts." Harry said, sitting back on his legs and wincing.

"We hit a rough patch. I'm surprised you didn't try to avoid it." Balthazar said.

Harry shook his head. "If I had, we wouldn't have made it here. I don't care how badly I get beat up along the way. I can heal while I rest, right?"

"Yes, but it's still not good for your health, regardless of whether or not you'll recover." Said Balthazar.

"This whole war hasn't been good for my health." Harry said. "Draco, would you mind terribly setting up the tents?"

"If I must." Replied the blonde. "Though this kind of thing really is beneath someone like myself, you understand."

"Ah, get over yourself and enjoy our camping trip, you pureblooded ponce." Harry scowled, keeling over backwards. "Ohhhh... there we go. The world isn't spinning anymore..."

As Harry remained as motionless as he could to stave away the dizziness, Malfoy unshrank and set up the magical tents. Both were a deep green color and looked from the outside as though they were ordinary tents. Inside, however, was a completely different story. While they each had a living room, bathroom, and two bedrooms, it was still fairly cramped. The refrigerators inside were kept fully stocked and there were three cupboards filled with various canned goods. Harry hoped all of the food within was still fresh. He wasn't that wise in the ways of wizarding food preservation, after all.

"Okay... here's how we're gonna work this with all of us here." Harry said, still staring up at the sky. "Me and Nym will be sharing one bedroom. Draco's taking the other one in our tent. Are the rest of you fine with sharing beds?"

"So long as you don't try to stick me and Granger together, I'm fine with it." Pansy said.

"Agreed." Hermione said.

"Why don't Hermione and I take one?" Ginny suggested. "Luna? You fine with hanging out with Pansy?"

Luna nodded. "Of course. It doesn't matter to me who I share a room with."

"Jolly good." Harry said, closing his eyes. "Ugh... so that's taken care of. Here's what I'm planning in regards to travel and the stuff in-between. We'll wake up at 6 every morning, eat, and after everyone's food is good and settled, we'll make another jump. When we land, we set up camp and go about our business. We've got enough for two meals a day, unfortunately. But we aren't going to be doing anything energy intense, myself excluded, so that hopefully won't be too big a problem. When night starts to fall, we'll set up a nice little campfire outside. That way, we won't have to be inside unless we want to be. Anything to keep us from going stir crazy around each other, yeah?"

"Oh, I hope we have marshmallows somewhere..." Tonks said, tilting her head.

"As for me, I'm probably going to spend most of my time sleeping." Harry said. "These jumps are really going to suck the energy out of me. I want to be woke up for dinner, though. And if there are any complications, come get me. I won't be out cold or anything, but resting will generally make things much easier, so don't worry about waking me early if it's important. We should be able to ward the general area around our campsites so that nothing feels like getting too close. But if something *does*, it's probably going to be magical. So I want to set up wards to trigger alarms, too."

"I assume you'll be doing that, too?" Asked Pansy.

"Yeah. But it'll have to be after I have dinner and before I shamble back in for the night. I don't want to burn too much magic at one time. I can always release the self-imposed system of locks Balthazar and I developed to let me use more magic, but it's a bit dangerous." Harry explained. "I've normally got control of my own normal magic pool as well as most of my wild magic. But it reaches a point where I could hurt myself from pushing it too much. So pretty early on, we thought up a simple system to keep that from happening. The up side is that with the locks open, I have access to more magic and thus more power. The down side is that it's severely stressful for my body and the time I can safely remain up and casting spells is lowered with each. With the first lock, I have five minutes. I pushed myself to just over six back at Number Twelve, so I ended up passing out and felt kind of nauseous for awhile after I woke up. With the second opened, that time is cut down to three minutes. The third and final one lets me use every ounce of magical power I have, but only for a single minute. Any more than that and I risk damaging my magical core... again."

"Was wondering what that was all about." Malfoy murmured to himself. "So what do we do to kill time, Potter? It's going to get boring just sitting around."

"I'm hoping to set us down near rivers and lakes and the like, so we can at least go swimming. It isn't like we can't magic the water to be warm enough to do that. Hell, we could probably blast a hole in the ground, fill it with hot water, and have a makeshift hot tub. Aside from all of that, I dunno what to say. My own time's going to be spent resting. I know the tents have radios in them, so there's always that. If it comes to it, borrow some of the books I asked Hermione to get."

"It's mostly just a series of geography and wildlife books." Hermione said. "I don't know how interesting everyone would find them. But it does tell us where the majority of obscure wizarding towns and communities are located. Plus it's going to help Harry plot out where to drop us, since we don't want to just land where some horribly powerful magical creatures live. The ones I borrowed are mostly related to the Black family's history. But it's still better than sitting around and staring at the walls, I'd assume."

"Any other questions?" Harry asked, hissing as he forced himself to sit up.

"What's in that flask you asked Nymphadora to get?" Luna asked.

Tonks made a face as Luna used her full name. Harry chuckled and patted her on the shoulder as he withdrew the flask and held it up. "This is a little something I thought might come in handy. I got it by pulling my weight with a couple of less than savoury types from Knockturn alley."

"Yeah, but what *is* it?" Asked Tonks.

"Felix Felicis. Liquified luck." Harry said. "One swig and your luck goes through the roof, I hear. Haven't had any reason to give it a test run, but I've read up on it as best I could. It's really hard to make and it's dangerous if you screw it up."

"Sounds like what Snape would ask second years to brew." Mumbled Ginny.

"Is the whole flask full?" Hermione asked, stepping closer.

"Not quite. And to stop the inevitable follow-up, it *did* cost a ludicrous amount. But if it works like it's supposed to, it'll be worth it. I figured we're going into a situation against a whole series of unknowns so it'd be best if we could at least *force* ourselves to have good luck even if it didn't come naturally. We're going up against Voldemort's remaining forces, however many corpses he's managed to resurrect, as well as whatever the hell Sergei Wagner is. There's enough in here for each of us to have about two sips apiece. I hope it doesn't come to it, though."

"Well just don't go trying to down it all at once if we make it to Voldemort without having to use it." Hermione warned. "It's toxic in large doses."

"I know, I know. Hence why I've been talking about sips instead of gulps." Harry said, putting the flask away again.

"How do you know it's real if you haven't given it a test?" Malfoy asked. "You could've been swindled."

"Moony knows I ordered it. Bit hard keeping the knowledge from Nym's mother, but we did. He was able to help confirm it's the real thing. Apparently he did quite well in Potions when he was in school." Harry said. "I know he did the best out of the Marauders as far as grades go. It's only because of his condition that he hasn't been able to get a nice, cozy job that pays well. Alright, enough sitting around talking. Let's get these tents broken in. I'm gonna take a short nap. Whenever you lot decide to eat, wake me up, okay?"

"Need some help getting inside, gramps?" Asked Pansy.

"I swear to Merlin I will transfigure a rock into a cane and swat you with it if you call me that again." Harry said, sticking his tongue out at Pansy, who snickered. Getting to his feet, Harry groaned. "Though I will admit to feeling about three times my age right now. Hey, do any of you know much about wizarding tents? There's something that I've wondered, but haven't been able to figure out. I asked Moony, but he didn't know either."

Tonks moved to help Harry toward the tent after seeing him wobble. "What is it?"

"How the hell do the toilets in these things work?" Harry asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's no septic tank or sewer system for them to flush into, right? So... what happens to the waste?" Harry asked.

There was a pause as everyone got an odd look on their faces. Hermione started to say something a few times, but kept shaking her head and looking thoughtful. Eventually, Pansy was the one to break the silence.

"Let's just smile and nod at the fact that they *do* work and try not to think about it too hard, alright?"

"I'm going to agree with Pansy." Ginny said.

"Cosigned." Tonks chimed.

"Is this what you think about when you're bored, Potter?" Malfoy asked, looking slightly queasy after pondering Harry's question.

"It's just one of those things I've never heard anyone talking about. I was curious." Harry said. "It's an honest question. I really would like to know how the hell the toilets function."

"I think you need to go lay down before you shoot any more disgusting questions to the group." Malfoy stated.

"Oh, fine. Be that way." Harry pouted, entering the first tent alongside Tonks.

After they had left, Malfoy let out a frustrated scowl. "Dammit all, that question is going to keep me awake at night, I just know it..."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

When Harry was awakened, it was just after seven that evening. Tonks escorted a very groggy Harry back out of the tent. Daylight had almost vanished completely in the small forest clearing they had set down in, and the crackling of the fire was definitely helping to ward off the chilly winds. Ginny and Luna had done some simple spells to keep bugs and other tiny creatures away so that sitting on the ground didn't wind up with someone running off screaming into the woods with fire ants all up in their clothing.

Sitting down cross-legged, Harry coughed a few times before asking, "What'd you lot do today?"

"Not a lot." Hermione said. "Mostly, we were busy getting a stock of firewood and overthrowing your plans."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Overthrowing my plans?"

"We've decided to sleep in shifts." Malfoy explained. "Two of us will always be up at any given time, monitoring things."

"That way you don't have to burn as much magic. If we hit any major complications, it wouldn't hurt to make sure you're in as good a condition to fight as you can be." Pansy said. "It's a bit more dangerous, and more than a little paranoid, but..."

"Hey, paranoia is the reason I ended up finding those Death Eaters. Nothing wrong with a little paranoia now and then." Harry said. "Alright, if I've got no veto power, feel free to do it your way, guys. I won't argue the point."

"Here." Tonks said, holding a marshmallow-skewered stick out toward Harry.

"Ah, we did have some. Fantastic." Harry said, taking it and holding it out toward the fire. "So what else? Anything I should be made aware of?"

"Not really. It's been a wonderfully peaceful day..." Luna said, pulling a marshmallow off her stick and popping it in her mouth.

"Do you think anyone's following us?" Asked Malfoy, who noticeably lacked the same kind of enthusiasm for roasting marshmallows.

"I'd be stupid to think we won't be sooner or later." Harry said. "I don't care as long as they don't try anything. If Albus sends someone after us to try and bring us back, however... that's a different story."

"We're going to fight, huh? Works for me." Malfoy said. "I could use a test of my skills. I appreciate the compliment you half-handed me back at your godfather's house awhile back, but I doubt I'm anywhere near Dumbledore's level."

"Well I doubt it's fair to duel me anymore unless I hold back. But if you didn't mind, we could always spar sometime. I was just shooting from the hip back at Number Twelve, but it sounded good, didn't it?" Harry asked, grinning.

"No overpowering your spells to get the upper hand?" Asked Malfoy.

"Promise." Harry said, crossing his heart. "Tomorrow morning, before breakfast maybe?"

"Sure. If it goes well, we might as well make it regular. It'd be best to keep our skills in top shape. I think everyone here could do with a bit of a workout." Malfoy said, looking around.

"Anyone who wants to can. I'll give a fair fight to anyone who wants to. Simple stuff only, of course. We don't want to go hexing each other's limbs off, after all." Harry said. "Sounds like a plan, then."

"You don't think the noise might attract attention?" Asked Ginny.

"It could. But I can always shift the group really quick if we hear anyone." Harry said. "It's not going to be a big deal. Not with the route I plan on taking. We'll be far enough away from civilization with each jump that no one but the occasional hunter might run across us."

"Heh. Very well, then."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Early the next morning, just as the sun was rising, Harry and Malfoy were preparing for their duel. None of the others were up, as the two had slipped out of their tent quietly. Not that it was going to matter in a few minutes, as the whole area was going to get a small makeover before they came to a stop.

"Next time, we have some coffee or something *then* fight." Harry said. "I didn't think my brilliant plan out enough."

Smirking as he passed by, Malfoy asked, "Oh? Wanting to back down, Potter?"

"Not on your life. I want to see exactly where you stand in terms of raw power." Harry said, watching Malfoy head a little ways into the forest. "Show me what you've got, Draco. When I can see just how strong you are, I can duel you on a fair level. That way you have a goal to strive to overcome; a way to see how far along you're coming."

"How long's it been since we had an actual fight?" Asked Malfoy, leaning back against a tree and closing his eyes. "Surely it wasn't the supposed Dueling Club that that Lockhart idiot set up."

"Could've been. My memory's never been great." Harry said. "I seem to recall the two of us being pretty evenly matched."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't irritated with you, Potter. The rate at which you gain power is almost obscene. I'll never be able to have a real battle with you again." Malfoy said.

Grinning, Harry walked over. "Wishing I was your peer again, Draco? A few years ago, I would have been repulsed by the thought, I'm sure."

"Yes, well, things change, don't they?" Malfoy said, idly staring down at Solieyu's wand. "We aren't the same people we were back in that shop."

"I never did ask if I hurt you." Harry said, drawing his wands and lazily twirling them. "If your jaw hurt as badly as my knuckles, then we'll probably be even."

"Your form was sloppy. It stung the rest of the day, though." Malfoy said, rubbing at his chin. "A few inches to one side and a proper fist could have made that very bad. The last I would have wanted was to magically set my jaw back in place. It wouldn't take long, but it's one of the worst feelings ever."

"Oh? Have you had your jaw knocked out of whack before I came along and tried?" Asked Harry.

"Not as such, but I did manage to hurt my left arm rather badly when I was young. The Manor has a lot of staircases. Let a child loose near stairs and they'll inevitably get hurt. Pansy was there when it happened, actually. I was doing fairly well, laying on the floor at the bottom, but she was freaking out as if I had died in front of her." Malfoy said, his eyes glazing over as he reminisced.

"What's going on, Draco?" Harry asked.

"In regards to?"

"You and Pansy. And Hermione." Harry said. "What did I shift in on back at Number Twelve?"

"Nothing, Potter. Something I wish I was able to escape. It's my problem and I'll deal with it as I see fit." Malfoy said, glancing off. "Granger was a mistake, pure and simple. A moment of weakness got me to this point. I don't plan on letting that happen again."

"You'll get nowhere without someone to protect." Harry said. "I learned that early on. My own power comes from the desire to keep those around me safe. What do you fight for?"

"I'm in this to kill my father." Malfoy stated.

"Is that the only reason you're on my side now?" Asked Harry.

"One of them. Listen, Potter, you may have your sense of justice and ideas about how to make the wizarding world a better place. I'm not bogged down with any of it. I don't have to feel like I'm doing something for the betterment of others. As long as my father suffers for all he's done to sulley my family's name, I'll be happy. If I happen to kill his comrades along the way, then so be it. But there's nothing beyond it for me, Potter. I have no other reasons to be fighting."

Malfoy suddenly recoiled as Harry had somehow closed the sizeable gap between them in an instant. The Ravenclaw's emerald eyes were narrowing as they drilled into Malfoy's own. There was something almost unsettling about the look Harry was giving him.

Without moving out of the uncomfortably close position he was in, Harry asked, "What would you do if Pansy were killed?"

"What?"

"If they got her. If you had to watch her die. If the realization hit that you would never be able to see her smile or hear her voice again. What would you do if she was killed?" Harry asked, speaking quickly and in a low tone.

"I'd kill whoever did it." Malfoy said, unable to maintain eye contact. "And I'd ensure she was given a proper burial."

"And that's it?" Harry asked.

"What do you want me to say? That I'd miss her? Of course I'd miss her, I've known her all my life." Malfoy spat.

"Do you care about her?"

"Potter..."

"Do you *care* about her?"

"Why does it matter?!" Malfoy yelled, shoving Harry away and glaring at him. "What difference does it make how I feel?!"

"Because I need to know." Harry said. "I need to know this plan isn't going to end up going tits-up because of this ridiculous situation you've gotten yourself into. You need to tell Hermione to let it go and you need to admit how you feel to Pansy. This situation needs to resolve itself before we get to Germany, Draco."

"There's no situation to *resolve*." Growled Malfoy.

Taking proper hold of his wands again, Harry nodded slowly. "I see. Maybe I shouldn't hold back. It's clear you need some sense beaten into you. You're denying everything just so you don't have to admit you can show real emotion."

"What the hell are you *talking* about?!" Asked Malfoy.

"You kept your relationship with Hermione a secret up to the point we left for Azkaban. Pansy clearly cares about you. You clearly care about her. I don't know what happened to end your relationship with Hermione. Honestly, it's none of my business. But this constant infighting between them has to end. And it can't do that without your input. You sat there as I put a stop to their fight last time. And they're sharing a tent. Do you honestly expect the dying embers to not spark back up into a fire eventually?" Harry asked.

"I'll handle it if it arises." Malfoy said. He raised his wands and dropped back into a combat stance. "Stop making me think, Potter. It's too bloody early for it. Let's just do what we came out here to do."

"No."

"No? What do you mean 'no'?!"

Harry leaned back against the nearest tree. "I mean there's no point. Even if I lowered myself to your level, you'd have no chance at surpassing it. You're holding back and you won't even admit it."

"Potter, if you don't start to fight, I *will*. And I assure you I won't be holding back." Malfoy said, gritting his teeth as he spoke.

"You will be whether you know it or not. Because a part of you will always be thinking about it. You won't be able to focus fully." Harry said. "Put a stop to this before it gets any worse, Draco. Or do you think such lesser emotions are beneath your pureblooded nature? Let me ask you one more question. I want to see something. Assuming all of us survive this living nightmare we're trapped in... what would you do if Pansy fell in love with someone else?"

"Like *you*?" Asked Malfoy, narrowing his eyes. "I'm glad she got over that."

"I was a placeholder." Harry said, shaking his head. "She was frustrated. You wouldn't accept her, so she came to someone who would understand. I'm not sure if she ever really cared about me. She just... needed someone there for her. She was too quick to recover after Leon got his powers under control and Nym returned to normal. That alone tells me she wasn't really in it for the long-term. Puppy love, perhaps, but nothing more. The both of us were both preoccupied with thoughts of someone else."

"So you're telling me she got with *you* and fawned over you so damn much because she loves *me*." Malfoy asked, making a face.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. We were both needy, the ones we loved weren't responding, so we... took shelter in one another. That's all." Harry said. "Look, Draco, I won't force you. But I know how it must feel. For awhile, I was in a bit of a similar spot. For the sake of the mission, if not yourself, pull her aside some time."

"Look, if it'll get you to shut up so we can fight, I'll agree." Malfoy said, scowling.

"Alright. Because I won't stop bugging you regularly until I see some changes." Harry stated.

"Stop butting into my love life, Potter." Malfoy spat. "Merlin's bits, you can't control *every* aspect of your life! Whether you want to believe it or not, a little chaos is *good*. Controlling and locking everything down is just as, if not more, unhealthy as what I'm supposedly doing. So shut up and take a dose of your own bloody medicine before you go spewing instructions at me."

Harry sighed and fell back into a fighting stance, eyes closed. "Fine. Get ready."

"This is going to feel a lot better than I woke up thinking it would..." Muttered the blonde, following Harry's lead.

A good twenty minutes or so later and Tonks came wobbling out of her tent. She paused after stepping out into the fresh air, hearing the sounds of small explosions coming from within the nearby woods. Turning, she wiped at her eyes and tried to find the source. She caught a few glimpses here and there, but the two were apparating back and forth at a rapid rate, firing off spells then getting out of the way before they were hit with any. She did make one mental note, however, as she turned to enter the second tent to wake up the other girls.

A few minutes later, after everyone was dressed, Tonks led them back out just in time to see the end of the fight. Malfoy came flying through the air, slamming into the ground within the clearing and ending up on his back. In seconds, Harry came apparating out of the woods, landing just over the Slytherin and dropping to one knee quickly, his wand aimed at Malfoy's throat. Both of them were panting heavily and their clothes were rather badly torn up.

"Give up?" Asked Harry, a feral grin on his face.

"Not on your life." Hissed Malfoy, apparating behind Harry, throwing an arm around his neck, and applying a choke as he jabbed one of his wands into the Ravenclaw's right temple. "How about you?"

Harry took note of the girls nearby out of the corner of his eye and decided to change tactics. It would be... fun. It would not only be fun, but it would completely throw Malfoy off his guard. Leaning back into Malfoy's hold, he tilted his head enough to the right so he could gingerly lick the tip of the blonde's wand. Almost immediately, Malfoy went scarlet, his grip on Harry loosening enough for him to break free. As the poorly-hid gigglefits coming from Pansy and Tonks filled the air, Harry aimed his wands at Malfoy and murmured, "Expelliarmus."

Malfoy's wands popped out of his hands and flew towards Harry, who caught them out of the air with a smirk. "Checkmate."

"Y-you... that... dammit, Potter, how was that fair play at *all*!?" Malfoy roared, flailing his arms wildly. "What in the hell was that!?"

"The art of surprise!" Harry said, tossing Malfoy his wands back. Pocketing his own, he looked over his shoulder, where the majority of their female companions were either blushing or laughing. "Plus it gave the girls some early morning entertainment! Win-win situation!"

Malfoy glared down at his own wand as though it had betrayed him. "Going to need to disinfect this now..."

"Come on, you big woman." Harry said, heading back toward the tent. "Let's get changed so we can all eat. I'm starving."

"*I'm* the woman? You're the one doing vaguely obscene things to *my* wands." Malfoy said, stalking after Harry with eyes narrowed.

"Victory no matter the cost!" Harry chirped, ducking into the tent quickly.

"Oi, Draco!" Pansy called, running up to him. She leaned in close to whisper something to him. He once more went bright red and swatted her away from him, storming into the tent to change. Pansy giggled, turning and walking back toward where the others were.

"What'd you say to him?" Questioned Tonks.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Pansy said, grinning.

"You asked him if he'd like *you* to lick his wand, didn't you?" Tonks asked, raising one eyebrow.

Pansy just giggled again. Hermione rolled her eyes and turned to head back into their tent to ponder what they would be able to eat that morning. Sitting around doing a lot of nothing didn't sit well to her, so she had taken it upon herself to jot up quick outlines of exactly how much food the group could have per meal.

After she had left, Tonks looked back to Pansy and whispered, "You only did that to get under her skin, didn't you?"

"Well... maybe a little." Pansy admitted. "But it was mostly because Draco's adorable when he blushes."

Ginny and Luna had sat down next to the long-dead fire and were trying to resurrect it. As they worked, Ginny glanced up and asked, "Wonder why Harry decided to pick such a, uh... fabulous method of winning..."

"I doubt Draco was counting on that kind of submission..." Luna said, looking thoughtful for a moment.

Tonks snorted. "I'm gonna have a talk with him about his method of victory later on."

"Hey, Tonks." Pansy said, grinning suddenly.

"What?"

"They're taking an awful long time in there."

"Indeed they are."

"Wanna go accuse them of doing nefarious things to one another in our absence?"

"We'll get chased around the clearing for our efforts."

"Well aware of that."

Tonks grinned as she and Pansy turned towards the tent Harry and Malfoy were in. "Let's do it."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** When did I ever say I was above a bit of fanservice? Hey, I've already made a Honks fic with light Harry x Pansy content. Why not throw in some Harry x Draco as a joke? The first Potterfics I ever wrote were HariDora, after all. Plus I have an awesome bit of art from somewhere or another that basically has that exact scene playing out over three panels. Panel one is Malfoy holding Harry at wandpoint. Panel 2 is Harry licking the tip of Malfoy's wand. Panel three is Malfoy rushing off panel with a nosebleed as Harry smirks victoriously at the reader. I've been trying to figure out a place to shoehorn that damn bit for ages!

So the roadtrip's started. It'll go on for a bit, folks. Nowhere near as long as in canon book 7, though. I think they're resting safely somewhere else by... 11 or 12 at the latest, I believe. Too lazy to check my notes. *Post-Edit Note: Yeah, the camping ends at the end of chapter 10, which I just finished the other day as of this upload.*

Anyway, just thought I'd end on a bit of comedic fun, since things are going to get fairly dark and serious soon. Any chance I have to get a bit more silly things in, I'll take it. I really don't have much to say aside from that.

I do have one quick thing to say for the people going haywire over Harry's 'sudden' attitude change, though: Stop your bitching and wait to see what I plan to do with it. Pissing and moaning about an incomplete story not making much sense in the grand scheme of things is silly. Everything will be explained in time. Just sit tight, kids. I'm gonna take you into Mordor then bring you straight back to the Shire, alright?

Seeya next time!

## Chapter 8 – Living Weapon

Draco pressed Harry up against the wall, his face mere inches away. Eyes narrowing, the blonde breathed, "Surrender, Potter?"

Harry smirked. "If I say yes, what'll you do to me?"

Lowering his head so his mouth was brushing Harry's neck, Malfoy purred, "Anything you'd like me to."

Harry jerked bolt upright in bed, lost his balance, and went toppling over the left side and onto the floor with a **THUMP**. Tonks, slightly out of it from being so rudely awakened, sat up, wobbling. She crawled over to peek over the edge of the bed. "Nightmare, Harry?"

"You have no idea." Groaned Harry, still face-down on the ground. "I can only hope Draco's having them too."

Tonks snorted, laying back down. "It's your own fault, Mr. Wand Licker."

"Quiet, hench wench." Harry scowled, sitting up to untangle himself from the blanket. "Damn it all... I wish we could've nicked a bottle of firewhiskey or something. I need some strong juju to get that dream out of my head..."

"Strong juju'?" Tonks repeated.

Sighing, Harry sat back up on the bed, setting the blanket next to him. "Look at it this way, how would you feel if you were having random nightmares about Pansy seducing you?!"

"I think I should be asking you about that." Tonks said, opening an eye to grin at Harry.

"Oh don't you even try to turn that one back on me, woman." Harry said, prodding one of Tonks' legs. "What time is it?"

Tonks looked to the right, where a little clock stood on the night stand. "About 4:30." She said. "Lay back down and get some more sleep. And spread that blanket back out. It's cold in here."

Standing, Harry did as he was told before crawling in next to Tonks. "Urg. I haven't heard him yell out tonight, so I guess he isn't suffering like I am."

"That or he just hasn't gone to bed yet." Tonks said, rolling onto her side.

Wrapping his arms around Tonks, Harry chuckled. "He'll have to sleep eventually. Shame I don't know any spells to mess with a person's dreams."

"You realize that to mess with his dreams, you'd have to actively think about the two of you snogging each other senseless, yeah?" Tonks said.

"...Right, didn't think my cunning plan out. Shut up, I'm groggy." Harry mumbled, pouting at the ceiling.

Giggling, Tonks patted Harry's chest lightly. "There there, Harry. You'll have other brilliant plans. How're you feeling, anyway? Still sore?"

"Still sore." Harry said. "Draco's damn good. Guess he's been practicing somewhere in Hogwarts or something. He's a *lot* stronger than I recall. Not exactly Dumbledore level like I suggested to Mrs. Weasley, but with time..."

"Sad you have to limit yourself to fight evenly?" Asked Tonks.

"Kind of. I do wish I had asked him for a duel before I got the Gauntlet attached." Harry said, idling playing with Tonks' hair. "Hey, what were *you* dreaming about?"

"Hmm... don't ask." Tonks said, a grin on her face.

"Why not?" Asked Harry.

"One wizard's nightmare is another's fantasy fuel." Tonks said simply.

"Oh good lord." Harry said, turning his head. "You were dreaming about the same thing I was?"

"Dreaming about it and rating you two as you went." Tonks said. "What can I say? You're both good looking and in fairly decent shape. Even if you are--"

"If you call me scrawny, I'll magic a platoon of ice cubes down that damn nightshirt of yours." Harry growled.

Tonks laughed, squeezing Harry in a hug. "Aw, I'm sorry. But hey, if I'm dreaming about it, you only have yourself to blame. Pansy and I sat around talking about you two awhile."

"Before or *after* you busted in on us changing?" Harry asked in a withering voice.

"After. That was the first time I'd seen *him* in a state of undress." Tonks said. "So after you two ran us back out, we sat around and compared notes, so to speak."

"You know, I think I'm going to go have some coffee." Harry said, groaning.

"Aww. Sorry, Harry!" Tonks said, letting go of him as he sat up and got back out of bed. "Come on now. If I did something like that to Pansy's wand..."

"I know, I know! Don't get me thinking about it!" Harry cried, quickly leaving the room. As he closed the bedroom door behind him, he let out a quiet groan.

"Wonderful. Company." Came a weary voice from the nearby couch.

Harry looked over to see a very tired-looking Draco Malfoy stretched out, arms behind his head. "So were you having nightmares, too?"

"I wasn't. Pansy was." Malfoy said, sitting up. "She apparently woke her tent up because of it. That sounds like something you'd do. Your

bad habits must have rubbed off on her or something. She wouldn't tell me what she dreamt, though she was shaking really badly when I answered the bedroom door."

Forgetting the coffee, Harry walked to one of the chairs and sat down. "Where is she?"

"My room." Malfoy said, leaning forward on his knees. "I stayed with her until she was asleep and I knew she wasn't going to have any more bad dreams. Then I came out here. Haven't been able to sleep since. I'm surprised your yell didn't wake her. She must have been really tired."

Harry smiled crookedly. "You sure you don't love her?"

"I love her, Potter. I've known her my entire life. Of course I love her. It just isn't in a romantic way." Malfoy said, blowing out a sigh.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"I'm sure." Malfoy stated.

"I bet she would've really enjoyed waking up next to you. You should have stayed with her." Said Harry, leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

"This is old hat for us. She used to have a lot of nightmares when she was younger. We lived near enough to one another that we often spent the night at each other's house. Things were a lot simpler back then. Every so often, she'd come knocking on my door at night, crying and telling me about her bad dreams. So we'd go sit up for awhile, talking, until she inevitably fell asleep again. I'd always wait awhile before sneaking out." Malfoy explained.

"I still think you're just trying to fool yourself. Maybe when I finish off Riddle and some semblance of peace can be restored... maybe then you'll allow yourself to open up." Harry said.

"It isn't about the war, Potter. I just don't think I could love her like you love Tonks." Malfoy said, looking over, a weary look in his eyes. "You just don't get how I was brought up. When I turned eight, Lucius

decided it was in the bloodline's best interests to find me a future wife."

"He wanted to set up an arranged marriage?!" Harry asked.

"Indeed he did. Thankfully, the idea bore no fruit." Malfoy said. "Anyway, I was brought up a certain way. Even though nothing came of it, I was put through the motions. Learning to *court* a girl wasn't a part of that because one was being found *for* me."

"Permission to speak freely?"

"Go ahead."

"Horseshit."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think you're grasping for excuses." Harry said. "Are you even hearing yourself? You're trying to blame your lack of confidence on the fact that you could have been set up with someone you didn't even know? Draco, love isn't that hard. Just tell her. She clearly cares. You clearly care. At least give it a *chance*. If nothing comes from it, what harm is there done? You don't think she'd just stop being your friend because of it, do you?"

Malfoy was silent.

Harry raised an eyebrow and turned in his seat. "You *do*, don't you?"

"So what if I am?" Asked Malfoy, running a hand back through his hair. "I'm happy with what we have right now. I don't want that chemistry to change. I've had to deal with too much change the last few years as is."

"And why risk one that could turn it for the better, right?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"Oh, do shut up, Potter. You couldn't possibly understand." Malfoy said.

"You're right. I couldn't. Tonks was my best friend, too. Granted, I haven't known her as long as you've known Pansy, but what difference does it make? You want a good indication of how the water feels, give her a hug when you greet her when she wakes up again later. See how she reacts. Just don't be too obvious about it or she'll catch on. These womenfolk we know seem to be rather bright, see, and I'm sure she'd know exactly what you're up to if you didn't act coolly." Harry said.

Malfoy closed his eyes and turned to lay back down. "Look, I'll think about it, alright? No promises, but I'll think about it. Now leave me to my thoughts, Potter."

"As you wish." Harry said, closing his eyes again.

And, sitting in absolute silence, the two remained in the living room until the sun began to rise. When it did, Harry got up and headed outside, wanting to check the weather prior to the day's jump, which he wanted to get out of the way early. They had remained in the same spot for too long due to the fact that it was the first real jump Harry had made. Now that he knew what it did to him and how far he could push himself, he was ready to continue onward.

Malfoy sighed and stared up at the ceiling. But he was only alone for about five minutes before his bedroom door opened and Pansy stepped out. She was rubbing at her eyes as she walked over, sitting where Harry had previously been. Malfoy sat up again, asking, "Sleep any better?"

"Always do." Pansy said, her voice scratchy. "Nn... what about you? No sleep per usual?"

"Same old, same old." Malfoy said, half-smirking.

Pansy leaned forward in the chair, far enough to wrap her arms around Malfoy's upper body to hug him. "Thanks for keeping my nightmares away."

Malfoy closed his eyes, his muscles relaxing slightly. The two sat like that for awhile, neither wanting to move. Malfoy was the first to break the silence, however.

"You alright?"

Pansy nodded slightly. "M'fine."

"Liar." Malfoy said, bringing an arm up to rub at her back. Her breathing hitched and her grip on him tightened. "...I'm sorry, Pansy."

"It's okay." Pansy whispered.

"It isn't. You deserve better." Malfoy said. "You know how I am. I'll never--"

"I don't care what you think I deserve, dammit..." Pansy said, weakly hitting Malfoy's chest. "Don't you get that yet, Draco? I don't want anything between us to change, either..."

"You don't? But..."

"I just don't want to lose you. I don't want you out of my sight. I get scared when you're not around..." Pansy said.

"Scared? About what?" Asked Malfoy, brow creasing.

"That I'll never see you again. Remember? When your father would get drunk, he'd start yelling about how things were back when Voldemort was at the height of his power and how he was going to mold you into a perfect Death Eater. That... scared me. I'd known enough from my own parents' talks to know Death Eaters rarely last long..." Pansy whispered, squeezing Malfoy tighter. "I kept having nightmares of seeing you in a coffin... I still have them..."

"Why haven't you ever told me this before?" Malfoy asked, pulling out of the hug to look Pansy in the eyes. "Why have you held this in, Pansy?"

"Thought you'd just tell me I was being silly..." Pansy said, staring down at the floor.

"You were right, of course." Malfoy said, putting his hand under Pansy's chin to bring her gaze back up. "Because there's no way we can lose. You saw what Potter's capable of doing. And I know you

saw how cut up he was after we finished out sparring session yesterday. We'll be fine in this, Pansy. We'll be strong enough for everyone. I don't plan to die any time soon. But until this ends, I know that talking won't convince you. If you want to keep sleeping in our tent, you can. I can stay out here at night."

"Isn't that uncomfortable?" Asked Pansy.

"Not really. Only reason I wasn't able to sleep was because I was thinking too much. Potter's outside, by the way." Malfoy said, looking towards the entrance. "Dunno why he's taking so long."

"Could be giving us some time." Pansy said, wiping at her eyes slowly. With a sniff, she sighed. "Sorry. I know I shouldn't get like that. It's just... hard to think rationally when you wake up from such a bad dream..."

"Understandable. Come on, I'll help you get your clothes and stuff over here." Malfoy said, standing up.

"You sure?"

"Positive. Come on." Malfoy said, offering a hand to Pansy, which she took.

Outside, Harry was kneeling near the campfire, staring at it as though expecting it to suddenly start talking. Malfoy cocked an eyebrow when he saw this and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Something was poking around." Harry murmured, reaching out and pointing at a spot in the ashes that looked disturbed. "I don't know why. It looks like the edge of someone's robe passed through here, though."

"I think you're being paranoid." Malfoy stated.

"I think we're being followed." Harry said, standing up and glancing into the woods surrounding their camp site. "And I think we'll need to make the jump earlier than I wanted. If you two are going into the girls' tent, wake them up. I'll get Nym out of bed. I want to get the hell out of here. I feel like I'm being *watched*."

Pansy and Malfoy glanced at one another, nodding as they went into the girls' tent. Harry waited for them to duck inside before he headed back into his tent, quickly moving to the bedroom and slipping inside.

"Nym? Nymmy, wake up. We need to jump early." Harry said, gently shaking the sleepy blonde.

"Nn... we do? Why?" Asked Tonks.

"We're being followed." Harry said. "Dunno who or what it is, but it's bothering me enough to make me want to change my plans."

Tonks groaned, slipping out of bed. Walking to the nearby dresser, she fished out a pair of clean jeans and slid those on. As Harry started back out, she grabbed her shoes and followed. Once back outside, Tonks looked around as Harry shrunk and packed up their tent. Shortly, the others had left their tent, which Malfoy took care of.

"You really think someone's after us?" Asked Ginny, looking groggy.

"Positive. We've been here awhile. Wouldn't surprise me if Albus' men found their way to us. We didn't exactly do a full jump last time. This time I'm going to need to take more care in how I move. I may pick an unplanned spot to drop us, just to help keep them off our trail." Harry said. "Sorry for having to wake you up unexpectedly. I don't like this any more than you do."

"It's alright." Luna said, slumping against Hermione and yawning. "Will there be coffee after we land?"

Harry snorted. "Of course. Coffee and breakfast. I'm hoping I'll be up to eating before I end up sleeping half the day. And starting tonight, we're going to begin keeping watch like you lot suggested. I don't feel safe in leaving the tents unattended to. Alright, gather around."

Harry and Malfoy pocketed the tents. But as everyone walked over, Harry suddenly had to whirl around, Cedric's wand flying down and out of his left sleeve, to block a hex that came at them from somewhere in the forest.

"Damn it." He hissed. "Too late..."

"I see you're still quite capable of defending yourself." Came a silky voice. Slowly, a group of five men began to appear from behind trees. The group converged and entered the clearing. "I was told to ask if you planned on coming back quietly."

"Good morning to you too, Snape." Harry said, drawing his own wand. "And I think you already know the answer to that question."

Severus Snape, leading a group of gruff-looking men, smiled at Harry. "Indeed I do. In fact, I was hoping you would respond so expectedly. It means I will get to use 'whatever force necessary,' I believe Albus called it, to retrieve you."

Harry glanced at the four men with Snape. He didn't recognize any of them. Narrowing his eyes, he asked, "Who are they?"

"Acquaintances." Snape stated. "Ones who readily agreed to assist my cause."

"Draco, get the girls back and get shields going. I'll deal with them and we'll make the jump as planned." Harry said.

"You don't need to do this." Malfoy stated, looking Snape's way.

"Oh, but I do, Draco." Snape said, looking toward the Slytherin. "You've all been branded as traitors to Albus' side. No one will miss any of you should you happen to never return."

"You're a terrible liar, Severus." Malfoy said, sighing. Looking around, he murmured, "Come on. Let Potter handle this."

"You aren't going to try stopping him?" Asked Pansy.

"It would be futile." Malfoy said. "I saw what that Death Eater said. I know he's a lost cause. I just wish I knew when and why it happened..."

The group moved away from Harry, whose eyes kept darting from one man to the next. "So, you came to bring me back or kill me... and this is the only backup you have? I thought you were smarter than that, Snape."

"Others may believe your laughable tales of power, Potter. I don't." Snape declared.

"Ignoring what I did to the Death Eaters who you let into headquarters?" Asked Harry, smirking.

"New recruits." Snape said. "A first year with half a brain could have beaten them."

"Believe what you want. Just know one thing - if you attack me, I won't hold back. If you raise your wand against me now, Snape, I won't let you leave this place alive. Seems as good a place as any to kill the real traitor here." Harry said, eyes narrowing.

"I have no intention of leaving, Potter. We'll dismantle you right here and now." Snape said, aiming his wand at Harry.

"Why won't anyone just leave us to our own devices?" Harry hissed. Parseltongue creeping up mid-sentence, he growled, "*You're going to die here, Snape.* I've already chosen what to kill you with! This has been a long time coming..."

"You assume you'll get the chance to attack me directly." Snape said. And then, taking a step back, he issued his order to the four men surrounding him. "Kill him."

Harry sighed quietly, bringing the Patronus Armor up as a slew of spells flew at him. Shifting, he walked over to where Snape was standing. Moving around behind him, he leaned in close and whispered, "You're the reason Nym was injured that day, Snape. Infesting my godfather's house and indirectly causing her to be burned... it's quite unforgivable. Does Albus even know what you're doing?"

"Oh, he knows." Growled Snape, whirling around. "He said I should bring you in at any cost short of death. However, I'm sure he would understand if I said I slipped; that you were going to slaughter the lot of us if I didn't."

"If you survive somehow, Snape, tell Dumbledore that as of this moment, he may as well be working for Voldemort as well." Harry

hissed. "I have better things to be doing! I won't be held up by you and your thugs."

"What should we do?" Asked one of the men. "We can't find him like this!"

"He'll turn up eventually." Snape snarled over his shoulder. "He cannot strike when he is hiding like this."

"Quite right." Harry said, his voice carrying through the clearing. "So why don't I get this over with?" And then, in a voice that no one outside of Balthazar could hear, he whispered, "First lock."

"Are you certain? We'll still have a jump to make." Balthazar said.

"I took more than this down at Number Twelve." Harry murmured. "Let me vent. It'll be good for my mental health."

"As you wish. But I *am* slamming the lock back in place at five minutes, whether you're ready for it or not." Balthazar said. "So mind the time."

"To hell with this." Another one of Snape's men said suddenly. Turning toward where Malfoy and the girls were, he nodded. "Why don't we go after *them*?"

"Hm... yes, that may well get Potter to stop being a coward." Snape said, looking thoughtful. "As you wish, then. The report will just have to indicate that they were using lethal force as well."

The man grinned and stalked towards the group. Raising his wand, he began firing spells. Malfoy's shield was holding, but it wouldn't for long. The girls quickly got their own wands out and reinforced Malfoy's spell. The man scowled at this and, looking over his shoulder, he shouted, "Oi, help me out here!"

Two of the other men came walking up and joined the first in battering the group's collective shield.

Malfoy, wincing, yelled, "Potter, any time now!"

A series of pure white hands shot up from out of the ground in front of the three attackers. Two caught sight of what was happening and quickly threw themselves out of the way. The third wasn't so lucky. Looking down, he caught one of the light clones' claws directly to the face. It sliced upwards, sending blood spraying as the man collapsed to the ground, howling in pain and clutching his head. Grinning maliciously, the three light clones dissipated.

"One." Hissed Harry's detached voice.

Harry reappeared opposite Malfoy and the girls. The light around his left hand pulled back enough to reveal his wand, aimed at another of the thugs Snape had brought. "The longer this goes on, the worse it'll be for you all. If you stop and leave now, you'll be spared. If you stay..."

"**FIRE!**" Snape roared, quickly raising his wand and shooting a dark-colored curse Harry's way. His cohorts followed his lead, including the two who hadn't yet got back to their feet. The light quickly wrapped back around Harry's hand and he apparated behind Snape.

"This was a terrible mistake, Snape." Harry said, shifting as the Potions Master spun around and began to fire wildly again.

As the cries of the first downed attacker filled the silence, Harry made his way over to the one who hadn't joined his friends in trying to break his friends' shield. Dropping into a crouch, Harry shifted back in, released the light from around his hands, and in a move he had used on his uncle so long ago, sprung back up, pulling both wands with him as he went. "**SECTUMSEMPRA!**"

Caught thoroughly off his guard, the man was lifted into the air by the force of the spell, which packed quite a lot more force than the one Vernon Dursley had taken. Blood splattered around the man as he came crashing back to earth, his body twitching every now and then.

Standing back up, Harry's eyes changed from green to red. And, as the light engulfed his hands again, he began to shift out once more, whispering, "Two."

"We're outclassed here, Snape..." Said one of the remaining men, sounding quite nervous now.

"If you even think about abandoning me here, Jacobs, I'll hunt you down and rip you apart myself!" Hissed Snape, turning to glare at the man. "He's just one boy. When he appears, **SHOOT** at him!"

The man, Jacobs, started to argue, but an odd sound filling the air caused him to close his mouth. Turning, he saw a disembodied hand, holding a wand that was aimed at his midsection. The odd noise he had heard kind of sounded like something clicking. There was silence for a few seconds. The man turned to react, but it was too late. A wild howling noise filled the air as Harry snarled, "Three."

The Eximo caught Jacobs square in the chest, sending him shooting across the clearing with such force that most weren't able to see which way he went. It wasn't until the sound of a sickening **CRACK** of the man slamming into a tree echoed through the air that anyone was able to see what had happened to him. He was lying, prone, in an expanding pool of his own blood. The tree he had impacted was splintering and, within seconds, had fallen back into the forest. A trail of blood and other bits of the man left a path from the point he had been to the point he had ended up at.

Harry shifted back in, fully intent on striking down the last of Snape's men. But as he did, there was a sudden lurching sensation within his stomach.

"You're running low already! Either finish them quickly or change tactics!" Balthazar ordered.

Harry, however, had a different plan. He rushed toward the man he had yet to attack. He spun in time to face Harry, but it wasn't quick enough to take aim. Harry pulled the man into an odd sort of embrace. Letting the Armor drop completely, Harry grinned savagely at the man, who was trying to shove him away. Flexing his Gauntlet-clad fingers, Harry suddenly grabbed the man and twirled him around. Once he was facing away, Harry pulled his right hand back. It shot forward again quickly, the clawed fingers driving through the skin on the man's back. He cried out, scrambling to get Harry away from him. But the Gauntlet's fingertips were too far in for that to work.

"What are you doing?" Balthazar asked.

"Something my other half tried getting me to do last year." Harry said, grinning maniacally. "A bit different, but it should still work. *MAGUS AUFERO!*"

The man he had attacked went rigid suddenly, his eyes wide, a choking wheeze escaping his throat. From the entry points on his back, a blue mist slipped out, spiraling around the Gauntlet. Slowly, the strange substance twisted down and into the Gauntlet itself. As this was taking place, Harry's eyes began to glow the same color as the mist. In a few seconds, the process had ended. Eyes returning to their normal color, Harry yanked his fingers from the man, who fell to the ground whimpering. Turning, Harry faced Snape as the blood dripped from the end of the Gauntlet.

"What the hell did you do to him, Potter?!" Snape demanded.

"What, the great Severus Snape doesn't recognize something? I'm shocked." Harry said, smiling. "You really don't know? Oh, very well. If I *must* tell you... I ripped out his magical power to bolster my own. If I didn't make him a squib, I'd be surprised. I sucked every last bit of magic he had in him out. Granted, it wasn't much... but it'll serve for what I have yet to get done. It means I'll have the power to finish you the way I've always dreamt of..."

"Magical vampirism?" Snape muttered to himself, brow creasing. Looking from his fallen thug back up to Harry, Snape dropped back into a combat stance and smirked. "Do you truly believe that you've grown strong enough to kill me, Potter? How very amusing that is..."

"I'm stronger than you, I'm faster than you, and I have the ability to outnumber you. I should be asking you why you think you can finish me." Harry said, flicking his right hand sharply to get off a bit of blood. "Look around you, Snape. Does it look like I'm playing around? Albus isn't getting his way this time and neither are you. I won't come back and I'll be damned if I'll let a cowardly parasite like you kill me. I'll give you one last chance, Snape. Turn and run away. It *is* what you're good at, isn't it? Turning and fleeing from danger?"

"I've faced death in the eyes more than you have, Potter. I've faced worse than death." Snape stated, eyes narrowing.

"And this will be the last time it happens." Harry said, wands spinning slowly near his hands. As he took hold of them, he smiled darkly. "You've always been a sad little outcast, haven't you, Snape? You'll always be one, no matter whose side you take in this war. You should be thanking me, you know. I'll relieve you of the torment you must feel. I'll give you what neither Albus nor Tom will give you. I'll give you death. Balthazar - second lock!"

"What?! Harry, no. I can't. We won't be able to make the jump if you do that!" Balthazar argued.

"We have enough for it, don't we?" Harry asked.

"That's not the *POINT*!"

"If we have enough, then believe in me. I know what I'm doing." Harry said.

"...One shot. That's *all* you get. It's too dangerous otherwise!" Balthazar said, sounding tense.

"One shot's all I'll need." Whispered Harry as the Gauntlet began to burn blood-red. The shine carried over to his eyes as he focused back on Snape.

Then, in an instant, he was gone, having both brought up the Armor and shifted in one fell swoop. Snape was quick to raise the strongest shield spell he was capable of producing, not knowing where the attack might come from. However, Snape found himself staggering backwards as the shield almost instantly shattered as Harry reappeared directly in front of him. His right arm was raised, the palm mere inches from the Potions Master's face.

Dropping the Armor, Harry grinned at Snape before purring, "*Regalis Strages!*"

Snape was faster than Harry realized and nearly got off the Killing Curse in the split-second delay the spell had. Fortunately, luck

seemed to be on his side for once. Snape's head was jerked back as he was sent flying, blood spraying violently from every orifice on his head. He fell back to the ground like a ragdoll, coming to rest at the foot of a tree. Slowly, blood began to pool under his head.

The instant the spell had fired, Balthazar shut off the flow of power from both limiters, slamming the locks back in place. Harry dropped to one knee, shaking badly, his vision quite blurry.

"Toldja..." Harry murmured, laughing weakly.

"Too close..." Balthazar said.

"Not done yet." Harry said, struggling to his feet. Across the clearing, Malfoy and the girls dropped their shield and began to run over.

"Harry!" Tonks cried. "Are you alright?!"

"No... but I will be in a few minutes. Magic burned too quickly on that last one..." Harry said, shambling over towards Snape's body. "Gotta have a quick snack. Stay there..."

Dropping back to his knees next to the Potions Master, Harry placed his Gauntlet-clad hand up against the man's back. Slowly, the tips pierced flesh. Closing his eyes, Harry hissed, "*Magus Aufero...*"

Again, a blue mist escaped from the victim of the spell. And again, Harry seemed to be revitalized by the use of it. When he pulled his hand away from Snape's back and got to his feet, he didn't seem quite so shaky. He still didn't look like he was in any condition to be transporting the group, but he also didn't look like he was about to pass out anymore, either.

As he walked back over to his friends, he let the Armor encase his body. "Come on, then. Quickly. I'm probably going to have to be carried in to bed when we land. This is going to be rough on the old body..."

"So wait a few hours." Pansy argued. "We can wait."

"No. We can't. Not here. Not in this carnage." Harry said. "If Snape was actually sent by Albus, then there's eventually going to be a team sent out to figure out why they haven't returned."

"Why the hell did fighting five men wind you so badly, Potter?" Asked Malfoy. "You handled more than that back at Black's house."

"Wasn't back to full. I probably won't get a chance to fully recharge until we get into Germany. It takes a *long* time to recover. The jumps aren't easy. So come on. Let's get this over with. I need some sleep."

The group quickly assembled near Harry, who pulled the Armor up around them as well. And, with a low groan, Harry shifted with them. The trip, though relatively quick, seemed to Harry like it was taking forever. Every minute that passed, his body cried out louder and louder to rest. It wasn't a pleasant feeling having every muscle you thought you had control over try to revolt all at once. A few times, he worried that he was going to have to make an emergency landing somewhere due to his vision constantly blurring.

By some miracle, however, he made it to the next campsite. Like the first, it was within a forest. Unlike the first, there was no clearing. They were simply in the middle of a giant area overrun with trees and plantlife. He safely set the group down, pulled the Armor away from them, dropped it himself, then fell over forward. He sucked in a sharp whimper as his head collided with irritatingly hard dirt.

"Touchdown." He said, weakly. "Draco, be a dear and get the tents up, yeah? Mine's... mine's in... a pocket somewhere..."

Malfoy nodded. "Your girlfriend can fetch it, then. I'm not going fishing in your pockets, Potter."

Harry grinned, letting his eyes slip shut. "Okay, I'm... I'm gonna sleep now... 'kay?"

He did manage to think one last thing as the exhaust and pain finally caught up and latched onto him. He idly wished that he could be there to see the look on Dumbledore's face when he learned of his retrieval team's fate. If Dumbledore was even responsible for Snape's

mobilization, in any case. Harry had his doubts. But he would have plenty of time to think about them later.

Right now, he needed rest.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** Oh god, I'm gonna hide from the rabid Snape fans now!

*Post-edit edit: Sorry this took so long to throw up here, guys. Blame my getting into the Wrath of the Lich King beta. Derp. Anyway, I'm about a third done with chapter 12 as of now. Having a strangely difficult time writing lately, which is odd since I've finally gotten past the damn CAMPING... Ah well.*

*Also, Draco x Pansy fluff. Sorta. Yay!*

## Chapter 9 – No Matter The Cost

It was a strain to do this, especially while recovering. But they had decided it needed to be done. A message had been sent to them. And they would just have to send one back. Dropping from the currents in front of the school, the light creature looked up at it with something resembling a scowl. Gliding toward the front doors, it phased right through them. Lunch would be getting served now. Once again, he would have a full audience to play to.

The creature walked at speed through the Entrance Hall, pausing only once directly outside the Great Hall to listen. The sounds of students eating and chatting away filled the air, along with the occasional murmur of Snape's noticeable absence. Apparently, things had just started, as Dumbledore's voice carved through the other noises.

"May I have your attention, everyone?" Dumbledore said. "As you may have noticed, your dear Potions Master is not with us this afternoon. The reason for this is simple: I have asked him to retrieve Harry Potter and his friends. It is quite dangerous out there, after all, and I do not believe Harry to be ready to face it."

In the quiet that followed, someone called out, "It's also quite dangerous in *here*. Was he ready to face anything that he was put up against inside Hogwarts?"

"A series of unfortunate events, I am afraid, and nothing more." Said the headmaster. "I will admit that Harry has protected the school more than he should have been made to. However, this is an entirely new level of danger altogether. You must understand, Lord Voldemort is not as simplistic an evil as, say, a basilisk."

"Yeah, but we've seen what Potter can do." Came another, different voice. "What makes you think he *can't* end the war?"

"Inexperience." Stated Dumbledore.

Breathing out a dark red mist, the light creature chose that time to burst into the room. Not by shifting through the doors. Rather, it

grabbed them and shoved them open at force. Everyone in the room turned to face the creature as it stood there, slightly hunched over, red mist escaping its mouth every few breaths.

"Inexperience?" Asked the creature, red eyes focused on the headmaster. "That 'inexperience' has gotten your Potions Master slaughtered like the animal he was, Albus!"

"Harry...?" Dumbledore said, eyes narrowing slightly as he went for his wand. "Why are you...?"

"Why am I here? To deliver a warning, old man." The creature snarled. "Snape brought some Death Eater initiates with him. Leaving him to choose who to bring with him was a mistake. One of many you seem to enjoy making. They used lethal force on both myself and my friends. Therefore, I used what force I deemed necessary. The fact that I've rid this school and the world of Snape was merely a happy side effect. If you hurry, I'm sure you can get to their bodies before the forest creatures do, though I wouldn't have hope that Snape will be able to have an open coffin ceremony. I'm afraid his face is in no condition to be seen by anyone."

Dumbledore aimed his wand toward the creature. "Killing one of our own, Harry? Is that really your way?"

"One of our own?! I ousted him as the traitor to our side, you blind old fool!" The creature roared. "Need I show you the pensieve memories of him meeting with Riddle, telling him the location, then *LEADING THEM IN* before you believe that?! Know this, Albus, and listen well, as I'm only going to say it *once*: I am ending this war. Your own desire to be seen as a hero will get you killed. And if you send *anyone* after us again, not only will they die like Snape did, but I'll personally come back here and claw out your **throat!**"

Dumbledore fired a strange, swirling bolt of energy across the room. But the creature shifted and the spell crashed into the door behind him, splattering it with an equally odd-looking blue sludge. Looking back at Dumbledore, red mist leaking out of its mouth constantly now, the creature hissed, "Don't give me a reason to kill you, Albus."

"Do you want to test yourself against me?" Dumbledore asked. "Do you truly, Harry?"

"I know my strengths as well as I know yours. By all means, Albus, if you'd like me to prove myself to you again, keep sending your sheep after me. I have no qualms with killing them. I *will* stop Voldemort's army before he can return to Britain. And nothing's going to stand in my way at this point." The creature said. It began to fade out then, slouching a bit more as it growled out one final line. "Why are you trying to keep Tom Riddle alive, Albus? Do you think you can save him, too?"

Dumbledore stared at the spot the creature had been for a long while before putting his wand away and sitting back down. A hard edge on his eyes, never looking away from that one place, he quickly whispered, "Minerva? Would you be so kind as to take a group out... and bring back my Potions Master?"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry winced as he rolled over in bed, coughing violently as he woke up. Too much for too long. Again. He sat up slowly, looking down at the blood now staining part of the bed. "My head hurts, Balthazar..."

"Banish the blood and return to sleep, then." Came the ghost's voice from his gem.

"Need somethin' to eat. And drink. Throat's on fire." Harry gruffed, slipping shakily out of bed. Keeping one hand on the wall, he headed for the door. Pulling it open, he carefully made his way over to the refrigerator. The silencing spells on the tents didn't seem to be in place, so he could just make out the sounds of talking coming from outside. Grabbing a cold can of soda, he popped it open and took a long drink. "...Nnh... oww."

"Are you sure that stuff is the best thing to drink after coughing up blood, Harry?" Asked Balthazar.

"No. But my life's full of stupid decisions, innit?" Harry mumbled, slogging his way toward the tent opening to listen in on what his friends were talking about.

"...you think he's really alright, Draco?" Asked Hermione.

"Of course he is." Malfoy replied. "I still don't see why you can't accept that."

"Were you watching the same fight I was?" Hermione said, her voice rushed. "He didn't need to be so rough with them!"

"Oh? Are you saying he should just tie them up and leave them for Scrimgeour's men?" Malfoy asked.

"Or the Order. Either way!" Hermione stated.

"And then what, Granger?" Malfoy asked, his voice growing cold. "Dumbledore gives Severus yet another chance, he turns his back on us again out of fear, and he lets Death Eaters and the undead into Hogwarts? Is that what you want?"

"You know it isn't. Stop putting words in my mouth." Hermione snapped. "But there wasn't the slightest bit of remorse in Harry's eyes! In the past, when he was forced to kill, he always got so upset about it. That was what differentiated him from Voldemort!"

"No, it was his common sense." Malfoy said. "We're at war, Granger. If you can't stomach what's going to be happening, then run back home to your damned family and cower! If you can't trust Potter, you should leave and stay gone. I won't risk anyone turning traitor on *us*."

"How *dare* you!" Hermione yelled. "I would never betray Harry! But you can't look at him and say he's the same as he used to be!"

"Of course he isn't, you stupid girl!" Malfoy argued. "He's finally himself! He's finally accepted what his purpose is! He's found his resolve. He knows what has to be done and he's damn well going to do it."

"Even if it means becoming a monster himself?" Asked Hermione.

"He isn't becoming a monster." Tonks finally said.

"Like *you* have a clear view on the situation." Hermione muttered.

"Better than you do." Tonks said. "Harry won't lose himself just because he has power."

"How can you be sure?" Hermione asked.

"Because I love him. Because when I look in his eyes, I see what he's really feeling. Because he acts so damned *tired* when we're alone together. He puts up a good poker face in front of you lot, but when he's just with me, he drops that defense. He's tired, Hermione. He's very, very tired. He just wants to get this over with so he can live his life rather than thinking he's a *weapon*."

"Potter will get the job done." Malfoy said. "How do I know? Because there's no way in hell he'd lose with me hanging around. He knows I'd never let him live it down. If we all die fighting Voldemort, I'll follow his spectral ass around the afterlife, taunting him for the rest of eternity."

"Talking about my ass now, Draco? If I didn't know you better, I might think you were trying to get into my pants." Harry finally sat, leaning back through the tent opening and giving the blonde - who had, amusingly enough, turned a brilliant crimson - a sly look.

"How long have you been listening in?" Malfoy asked, scowling.

"Long enough." Harry said, letting himself lay back, closing his eyes. "Ground's nice and warm. Had to get out of bed. Throat hurt. We may be leaving earlier than normal tomorrow. Went and paid Albus a little visit. Told him to get the hell off my back or the next group that comes after us won't even be identifiable. You should have heard him. He thought I was unprepared for this. He still truly believes I'm incapable of holding my own in a fight. He still believed Snape was on his side."

"Shutting his eyes and covering his ears, making himself blind and deaf to that which he wishes to avoid." Said Luna, who was gazing dreamily into the fire that was already roaring away. "He doesn't want to admit that he's wrong."

"How're you feeling?" Tonks asked.

"I feel like someone hit me in the chest with a sledgehammer. I probably should have used a lesser curse on Snape. He wasn't worth

this kind of magic drain. Even bolstering my supply with one of those idiots he brought with him, it was hard on my system." Harry said.

"Think you're going to sleep any more today?" Asked Ginny.

"Probably not. I'll be on edge until I'm sure Albus won't send another wave after us. I know he probably plans to retrieve Snape and those Death Eater wannabes, but I'm not sure if he'll send out anyone from there. Much as I'd love to sleep for a week, it just isn't on tap. Gotta keep us out of his grasp." Harry murmured. "So Hermione, I hear you have issues with the way I handle my enemies now."

As he tilted his head back to look at Hermione, the bushy-haired girl flushed and looked off.

"I just think there could've been other methods. Less grisly ones." Hermione said.

"Perhaps. But Snape deserved to die and so did the fools he brought with him." Harry said. "I've wanted to remove Snape from existence for years now. He's been useful once or twice. Otherwise, he's been a bitter, spiteful, greasy-haired traitor. Pick a side and see it through to the end, don't just jump from one side of the fence to another as the situation calls for."

"Fine. But what about the brutality, Harry? Was it *really* necessary?" Hermione asked, finally looking at Harry.

"To me, it was." Harry said, sitting up so he could look at Hermione right-side up. "Do you want to know why? Should I explain my thought process to you?"

"You don't have to go that far. I just want to know why you've been acting like you have." Said the Gryffindor.

Harry sighed, pulling the rest of himself out of the tent to sit cross-legged on the ground. Leaning forward against his knees, still a little shaky, Harry murmured, "No. If I don't explain my logic these days, you'll never be satisfied. Alright, children, gather 'round the campfire. Uncle Harry's got a bedtime story to tell..."

Closing his eyes, Harry started talking slowly. His throat still burned. "Using force puts a message across, Hermione. It paints a very clear picture. If I were to knock them unconscious and leave them for Albus and his Order, that would mean Hogwarts would be in jeopardy, to say nothing of us. Snape would continue to double-cross everyone. He would most assuredly come after me again to try taking his revenge. Sooner or later, he would pick up on the fact that jumping takes a great deal of my energy. As good as I'm sure most of you are, do you really think you could hold yourselves against him? Him and a handful of potential Death Eaters? And do you think he would bring so few the next time?

"It's time to stop playing around. I'm not some child anymore, content to avoid death whenever possible. Look where that's gotten me. We should have one more on this trip. Because of my hesitance, Leon's dead. That will never happen again. If you don't like the way that fight went, and this extends to everyone here, then go back to Hogwarts. Because things are bound to only get worse from this point on. In fact, I'm positive of it. But nothing is going to slow me down. Going all out as I could against Snape and those men was a mistake. It caused an unexpected delay in our trip. I can't afford that again. So anyone who comes after us next gets dispatched in the quickest, simplest way I can think. But rest assured, they WILL die. I'm not going to let anyone convince me otherwise. Anyone still working for Albus may as well be working for Riddle at this point. Now I have to deal with two sides wanting to stop me when I *should* only be having to worry about the one. But since Albus has attempted this pincer attack, I need to do what I can to ensure he doesn't get the drop on me. And if that means killing people we know, so be it. They're all just sheep. Foolish, mindless, powerless sheep."

"You can wait until after you rest to do this." Tonks said, rubbing at Harry's back when he suddenly dissolved into coughs. She frowned when he pulled his head away from his hand, however. "Is that blood?"

"Probably." Harry hissed, wiping at his mouth. "I'll get by. Just pushed myself too hard. That's all."

"Now I *know* you need to rest. You can explain things to us in full *after* you can talk without throwing up blood." Tonks said. "Get back inside."

"Nym... I can do this." Harry argued, shaking his head. "They have a right to know."

"Not at the cost of your health, they don't." Tonks stated, her voice getting an authoritative edge to it. "Now get your stubborn ass back in that tent and lay the hell back down before I hex you out and float you back there **MYSELF!**"

Harry gave the girl a weak glare as she yelled at him. "My health will be *fine*, Nym. I'm not exerting any energy here."

"Apparently you *are*." Tonks said, grabbing at Harry's bloodied hand and jerking it up. "What do you call this? Does this happening not count as over-exerting yourself, Harry?"

Harry pulled his hand out of Tonks' grip, sighing. "The only time in this damned trip I probably *won't* be over-exerting myself is when I finally kill Riddle. My body will adjust. Balthazar will help keep my wounds healed. And the Stone's power will ensure I don't die. I might pass out once in awhile, but I'll be *fine*, Tonks."

Tonks flinched slightly at the sudden use of her last name. Scooting away from Harry, she cast a furious glare off in the other direction, muttering, "Fine. Do whatever the hell you want. You will anyway, whether we think you should or not, apparently."

Rolling his eyes, Harry turned back to the rest of the group, who now all looked slightly uncomfortable. "You all should have known what this mission would entail from the minute I outlined it to you. Victory no matter the cost. That's what I promised Leon. That's what I plan to execute."

"You're being reckless." Hermione said, voice quiet. "I just think you're going too far..."

Harry held his right arm up, gem-lined side facing Hermione. "This was going too far, as well. I've lost the lower part of my right arm

forever. If I ever want the Gauntlet off, it's taking my right arm from the elbow down with it. If I'm lucky. It's slowly starting to spiral up from there. Balthazar said he isn't sure why that's happening. Possibly altering itself to deal with my magical power, I dunno. Point is, it's messing with my mind. Balthazar's also said that it's an unfortunate and unavoidable side effect. If the chance to live that long had ever played into my plans, I would face one of two outcomes. I'd either have to lop my own right arm off to prevent the Gauntlet from fully taking control of my body or I'd go insane."

Most were now staring at Harry strangely. Ginny was the one to voice the question everyone was wanting to, however. "What do you mean 'if the chance to live that long' had played into your plans?"

Harry sighed as he stared down at the ground. He knew this would happen eventually. He really, really didn't feel like explaining himself right now. But he knew he had to. He had been given the chance to go back in and rest and he had chosen against it. Now he would simply have to weather the storm that was going to spin to life when he finished telling his friends.

"The *Lucidus Susceptor* is a foolproof spell. I can't find any method to alter it. The spell *will* wipe Voldemort off the face of the earth, throwing him into an inescapable void. The downside is that I'll be vanishing along with him. There's no alternative. But it's what has to be done. For the greater good, I can't let Voldemort continue living, even if it means sacrificing myself to do so." Harry said, steeling himself.

A shadow fell over him from the left. His head turned slightly to look in that direction. Tonks was on her feet, looming over him. Then something fell to the ground. Looking away, Harry murmured, "Don't do this to me, Tonks."

"You plan to *kill* yourself to kill him?!" Tonks yelled, tears flowing freely. "And when were you planning on filling the *rest* of us in on this?! What the hell is wrong with you?! Do you just not give a shit about what the rest of us think or feel? Are you so damned focused on your goal that you've abandoned everything else?! What about our

wedding, Harry? Weren't we talking about having it once the war ended? Huh?! What happened to that?!"

"Stopping Voldemort and bringing peace back to the planet is more important than our future together." Harry said, his voice low. "I'm sorry. I didn't *want* to say anything about the Susceptor at all. But now that we're being chased, I couldn't keep it a secret. You all needed to know what's going to ha--"

Harry was hit so hard by Tonks' hand coming down that he crashed over to the ground, wincing. As he looked up, he saw the girl storming off into the tent the girls were staying in. Luna cast a quick glance at Harry before getting up and hurrying off after her. As the blonde vanished into the tent, Harry sat back up, rubbing his aching cheek slowly, his eyes closing again.

"Are you sure there's no other way?" Asked Malfoy.

"None. This way, he can't block it. Once it starts, it's going to be unstoppable. There's nothing I can do, Draco." Harry whispered. "I think... I'm going to go lay down after all. Feeling tired again."

Harry got up, still wobbling slightly, and ducked back into his tent without another word, leaving his friends in the silence he had created. Malfoy watched the tent's opening for a long time before he got up as well, heading off into the forest. Moments later, the sound of trees being blasted by spells filled the air.

Ginny looked over at Hermione. "So what do we do?"

"I don't know." Hermione said, staring sadly into the fire. "Pansy...?"

Pansy, instead of looking upset like Ginny and Hermione, seemed to be deep in thought about something. It took a few more times of Hermione calling her name before she snapped out of it. "Hm?"

"What do you think we should do?" Hermione asked.

"Got a few ideas brewing. Gimme awhile. I have a feeling it's going to be a long day. You two might go in and try calming the bluenette down with Lovegood." Pansy said, still looking rather distracted.

The Gryffindor girls glanced at one another quickly before nodding. It was clear Pansy wasn't in the mood to talk, and Tonks' condition seemed to warrant being looked after by more than one person. With a quick "We'll be inside, then," Hermione and Ginny ducked into the girls' tent. When they were gone, Pansy chanced a look into the forest. Malfoy was still out of sight and, apparently, still killing poor, innocent trees. She had the opportunity and she was going to use it. Getting up, she headed quickly into Harry's tent.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Harry? ...Harry, can I come in?"

"Do what you want."

Pansy pushed open the door to Harry's bedroom, where he was laying on the bed, arms crossed behind his head. He was staring up at the ceiling through unfocused eyes. Making her way over to the bed, Pansy sat on its edge. For awhile, neither spoke, though eventually Pansy got tired of the silence.

"You've thought of all the alternatives?" She asked.

"In regards to the Susceptor's outcome? Balthazar and I have gone over every potential method of changing it that we could think of. We've thought about changing the place Voldemort will end up, we've thought about changing the spell to try pumping raw power through it to outright kill him, we've argued over whether or not we need all one hundred wands to invoke the spell at all, and we've settled on the fact that no matter what we do, the result will remain the same. I'll die from using the Susceptor. There's no way around it." Harry said.

"The spell clearly seems to do two things." Pansy said, staring ahead at the wall. "It obviously will transport the Dark Lord somewhere else. But it doesn't make sense, does it? Why does it transport him yet kill you?"

"Because of the power required." Harry stated. "I'll have to release all three locks, channel every ounce of my power into the spell, and pray the ghosts take care of the rest. If any one part goes wrong, I'll die and Voldemort will remain alive. If the spell misses, if I don't put the

right amount of power into it, if the unknown factors don't maneuver the way I'm hoping they will... if anything happens that isn't in line with any of my projected possibilities, it will all be for nothing."

"Yeah, but what I'm saying is this: If it can teleport Voldemort, why can't it do the same to *you*? Can you not tweak the backlash in some way?" Pansy asked.

Harry went silent at this, his brow creased. "...Balthazar?"

"Theoretically, it could be possible. But do you understand how difficult it would be to even consider changing something like that on the fly? Because that's exactly what you'll have to do, Harry. When the Susceptor is reaching its climax, after Voldemort has been sent into the Void and while the summoning circle is receding, you'll need to drastically switch gears and perform a series of small, precise changes. Fail and you could cause the Void to reopen and suck up everything within a ten mile radius at worst. The ramifications of an error at that critical moment could lead to the deaths of all of your friends." Balthazar said, his voice quiet.

Harry closed his eyes. "Then it isn't an option. I won't put any of you at risk any more than I absolutely have to, Pansy."

"Stop being so god damned stubborn, jackass." Pansy said, turning and leaning against the bed so she could glare at Harry properly. "If it means bringing peace back, all of us would gladly die!"

"I won't let any more of my friends die." Harry said. "I've already lost too many."

"Even if he could pull off the changes, the alteration wouldn't be guaranteed." Balthazar said. "If we were to, say, make the spell transport us elsewhere, something still might go wrong in transit. The Gauntlet might be wrenched off of Harry's arm due to the chaotic forces that would be at play. It could deposit him in the middle of an ocean, too fatigued to shift himself back to land. It's too big a risk to take. He won't risk your lives, and he doesn't want to make his own death any harder than it needs to be."

"I'm being selfish in that regard." Harry murmured. "But this way, my death should be simple. My magical power will have drained entirely if all goes according to plan. Even if I survived, I'd never be able to perform magic again, Pansy. And that would almost be worse than death to me. I know that's also a very selfish thing to say. But after living the last part of my life surrounded by it, leaving magic behind would be impossible. Sure, I would be alive, and I'm sure Tonks and I would get married as planned. But I would be acting the entire time. I wouldn't be truly happy. I would get a normal job at some Muggle business and make an honest living. But it wouldn't be what I want. My options are death or falling into an inescapable depression."

"For someone so smart, you really are an idiot." Pansy said, getting to her feet. "Do you think we're all going to stand around while you fight him?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"The Dark Lord, jackass!" Pansy yelled. "We're not going to let you stare him down by yourself! When you go to use your big climactic spell, we're going to help!"

Harry stared at Pansy like she'd grown a second head.

Pansy opened her mouth to continue ranting, but stopped after seeing the look on Harry's face, which was slowly turning into something else. Groaning, Pansy put her head in her hands. "You didn't even consider it, did you? You aren't going to be using just your own magical power to stop him, Harry."

"If we used one of them as a type of lightning rod..." Harry began, slowly.

"We could have an excess." Balthazar finished.

"...Pansy, I could kiss you!"

"Better not, you blockhead. Your future wife would kill us both." Pansy said, grinning. Sitting back down, she shook her head. "What did you think was going to happen that we couldn't help you out? If you plan to do what you say - protecting us - then why the hell *couldn't* we?"

"I... don't know." Harry stated, dumbly. Sitting up, he rubbed at the back of his neck. "I guess I've just always had this mental image of fighting Riddle in a one-on-one sort of setup. You know, like in every terrible movie ever..."

Leaning over to hug Harry, Pansy patted his head. "There there, Harry. We'll all forgive your temporary stupidity. But only because we all love you."

"What, even Draco?" Harry asked, making a face.

"What, you don't want him as part of this weird little harem you've assembled?" Asked Pansy.

"Harem?!"

"You're traveling with five girls and one other guy. One whose wand you've oh-so-delicately licked." Pansy said, grinning as she got back off the bed. "Sounds like a harem to me!"

"Parkinson, if you don't get out of here right now, I'm going to brain you with every pillow I can find." Harry said, scowling through a blush.

"Oh, very well. If I must. Might oughta come let your girlfriend know you aren't planning to kill yourself, though. Might wanna tell Draco, too, before he clear cuts the entire forest." Pansy said, heading back toward the door.

"I think *you* might be a better candidate to tell Nym." Harry said. "She... probably doesn't wanna see me right now. I know it's asking a lot, but..."

"Don't worry. I was going to go check up on them next, anyway. I'll let them know what we talked about, alright?"

"Alright. Thanks, Pansy. Seems like you're always bailing me out of hopeless situations." Harry said.

"I'm a woman. It's what we do. If we left the world to you menfolk, we'd all still be living in caves and hunting with spears." Pansy said. "...Hey, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"If that was the case, and Voldemort was a big-ass caveman we were hunting, and you and Draco sparred again, would you have licked his spear tip instead?"

Pansy dissolved into laughter as she rushed out, barely avoiding the pillow that was thrown, at great force, from the bedroom.

oOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** This is another scene that I wrote the skeleton for years ago. It was something set to happen in book 6, however. Pansy and Draco weren't going to be revealed to be on Harry's side until towards the end of 7, with Draco being an animagus that hid in plain sight via a dove form. Harry was going to spend most of the book speaking entirely in Parseltongue after Albus failed saving Sirius at the Ministry. The first time he would speak outside of it would be when talking to Pansy down by the lake.

She and Harry would have a little fight, with Draco being the only one sort of on Harry's side by then - Pansy would come in later - and it would end with them kissing at some point. A short little snippet is as follows:

"Shut up, I'm not done." Pansy sniped. "This is hard enough for me. Do you have any idea how bloody embarrassing this is to me? Just... can't you do something to alter the spell? So that he dies and you *don't*?"

"Why do you care?" Harry asked, looking off to one side.

"You'd be surprised." Pansy said, her voice quiet.

Harry looked back to her, brow creased. "What do you mean?"

She leaned back down so that her face was right above Harry's. "If you win... and that stupid little harlot is still chasing after that freak... I don't suppose I would mind you following after me. If you wanted."

Harry frowned. Gears slowly turning in his mind, Harry began to ask, "What are you talking about?" But he was cut off midway through by the girl's lips pressing against his once more. This time, when she pulled back, she immediately scrambled to her feet and ran up towards the castle. Harry tilted his head back to watch her upside-down form retreating.

When she was inside, he slumped, staring blankly up at the sky again. "Did Pansy Parkinson just admit that she loves me?" He asked to no one in particular.

As you can see, things were going to be very different. If I can get a good PDF setup going - I just need an editor that can lemme edit in-file and create a little chapter menu to the side - then I plan to collect all seven books plus extras after I finish. There'll be one for each year and then one for all the unused stuff. Anyway, long AN is long. I'll shut up now. Seeya next time, folks.

## Chapter 10 – Within The Woods

The next week was a tense affair for everyone in Harry's group. Because although Pansy had told Tonks of the change to Harry's plan, it didn't change the fact that Harry had been planning to sacrifice himself. Harry had taken to sleeping out in one of the chairs in the living room area while Tonks slept alone in the bedroom. They had made a few more jumps and were getting into German territory finally. Unfortunately, Harry had been having some disturbing nightmares as of late, including one where he was positive the Death Eaters were pushing as far east as Ukraine.

If Voldemort's forces were trying to get into Russia, it would complicate things. With Germany, it wouldn't be quite as difficult to track him down. As it stood, Harry was banking on the Dark Lord remaining firmly in place in the Thuringian Forest. If he left the forest's protection and headed due east, Harry would need to figure out a way to track him. Worrying about this, Harry had spent most of his down time between jumps being incapable of sleeping well. Eventually, Ginny was the one to call him out on his increasing fatigue. A large fight had broken out, with Harry seeing just how much of Molly Weasley there was in her daughter.

Harry had told them exactly why he seemed so worn out, however, telling them the things he had been having nightmares about. Around that time, Tonks finally seemed to forget about the past. She had comforted Harry, who was clearly stressed beyond healthy limits, and said that he could return to the bedroom; that she would once again help him try to sleep well at night. He had welcomed the reprieve and the two had retired early.

It was late in September, almost nearing October, when Harry and his group entered the northwest part of Thuringia itself. Until they reached the Forest, they would be landing in any kind of cover they could take. As they had passed into Germany, the weather had dipped and they had all been forced to switch to their heavier clothing. Harry was also having to try and figure out just where in the Thuringian Forest that Voldemort was. It wasn't a small patch of

trees by anyone's standards, and Harry only had a vague idea of where the hell it was to begin with.

Still, he knew the way to the church hidden within the Forest itself, but even that wasn't too much to go on. At best, he knew it was somewhere in the southwestern part of Gotha . He wasn't forward to crossing more mountains. The more current switches he had to make, the less distance they could cover with each jump and the more exhausted Harry would be afterward.

It didn't help that there seemed to be tiny little settlements, both wizarding and Muggle, set in baffling points within the Forest itself. Harry had spent a good deal of time trying to find secluded spots between towns, resorts, and the odd castle or two that served as tourist spots. So far, he had done fairly well of himself as far as navigation went, though a few times one of his friends would comment that it seemed that they were too far off in one direction or the other for the destination they were heading to. Harry would scout around the area, consult the map he had stowed away, and change the next jump accordingly.

A few times, Harry had been forced to set them down dangerously close to a city, and the smell of food often drifted into their camp. When October had finally rolled in, the group had settled into a longer-than-usual campsite a good dozen miles outside of what appeared to be a cozy little wizarding village. Harry said since they were nearing their destination, he wanted to rest up more than usual, just to be in top form should anything unexpected happen. The temptation to go into the wizarding town to get some nice, hot food was strong. But Hermione had killed the idea after saying that unless they knew fluent German, they wouldn't be getting much of anything, save a few odd had argued that most places in the world seemed to at least know enough English to deal with the annoying tourists that sometimes invaded.

Figuring she'd try her luck, Tonks changed her features around and asked Harry to bring her closer to the village. He had done as she wanted and, after about ten minutes, she returned looking quite upset with herself. When asked how things had gone, Tonks simply muttered that Hermione had been right, said that all of the people in

town looked and smelled like they regularly wallowed in mud with their livestock, and asked to return to camp.

It was a pleasant, if freezing cold, place to have built a camp. Staying warm within the little barrier Draco had set up was simple enough, however, and didn't require much upkeep. One night, feeling as though he and his friends were getting complacent due to the fact that they hadn't been followed again, decided to wrap himself in his invisibility cloak. Sneaking out into the chilled night air, he scanned the trees surrounding the camp. He had been able to detect no one following them, nor was he seeing or sensing anything now. But he still thought something felt off, and he had learned a long time ago to always trust his feelings.

The snow that had covered the spot they had set down had all been magically moved to give them a slightly less soggy place to sit by the fire, so Harry wasn't worried too much about moving around it. It was when he hit the edge of the encampment that he got nervous. Deciding to try and check the area better, Harry knelt and put the palm of his right hand to the ground. closing his eyes, he tried to pick up on anything in the surrounding area. Any living creatures, moving leaves, or anything else that might be lurking. He could very faintly sense things due to being able to travel on the magical currents. It wasn't enough to give him a pinpoint location on anything he *did* manage to detect, but it would at least point out anything that might not ought to be there.

Sure enough, there were three things in the nearby area that were decidedly bigger than any creature that lived in this location. They were all perched in trees overlooking the campsite and were as immobile as they could make themselves. Harry wasn't sure if they had invisibility cloaks as well or if they were using another manner of disguising themselves. He also wasn't sure whose faction they belonged to. Obviously, they could have been Death Eaters, who had stumbled along the camp during the day. But they just as easily could have been more sheep sent byDumbledore.

Harry tried not to rule out spies sent by the village, since according to Tonks they seemed to be fairly stupid backwoods people. But Harry knew it would be foolish to underestimate anyone. Turning, Harry

slowly made his way back to the tents and, once inside them, quickly roused the others, telling them what he had found. And, one group at a time, told them his plan. They would wait inside until morning and try to get some more rest. He would sit out by the fire until dawn, at which point he would sneak back inside. The groups would leave their tents after Harry came back out and he and Draco would go off to begin one of their semi-regular sparring matches. If they just so happened to 'accidentally' knock the onlookers out of their hiding spot in the process, then so be it.

It was a long night for Harry, who parked himself near the fire and simply stared up at the spot in the trees he knew the unknown spies were located. But Harry could be very good at staying very still if he wanted to be. And, as the safety of himself and, more importantly, his friends were potentially at stake, he very, very much wanted to be.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"So, Draco, feel like a little warm up before breakfast?" Harry asked as he and Malfoy slipped out of their tent in the morning.

"Depends on how much power you plan to channel through your right arm, Potter." Malfoy said, wincing slightly as he looked around. The cold might have been staved off, but the absurd brightness of the snow in the morning wasn't fun to look at through groggy eyes.

"If you two are going to fight, do try not to send any debris flying back into camp this time." Said Luna, walking over to the fire to get it flaring up a bit more. "We don't want another incident like what happened back in Osterholz."

Harry frowned. "It wasn't my fault! Draco's the one who decided to try to roast me!"

"Anything goes, you said." Malfoy said, grinning aside at Harry.

"Yes, well, I think we'd all like to not have to scramble to prevent another forest fire." Said Ginny, who looked surlier than usual for that time of day.

"Alright, alright. Draco and I will be careful. Right?" Harry said, nudging Malfoy.

"Sure. Careful. Let's get this over with. I need some coffee or something..." Malfoy mumbled, rubbing at his eyes.

Hermione zapped the ground at their feet as they walked off, ordering them to make sure they were, else she'd unleash Ginny's fury on them. This, of course, got Ginny snapping at Hermione, who seemed almost amused by her roommate's cranky behavior.

Harry and Malfoy had spent the last half hour discussing a small routine they would fall into when they would knock the spies out of their trees. When Harry cast a certain spell, Malfoy would move in a certain way. They would fight back and forth with rehearsed moves until they both turned and fired a volley toward the trees. This would be the cue the girls needed to aim and provide backup... though if Ginny's mood were any indication, it was entirely possible the redhead would be more than capable of dropping all three of the spies on her own.

"I really hope they don't all fall into the same pattern." Harry murmured as he Malfoy got into position and fell into combat stances.

"Don't even kid about something like that. One at a time I can handle them going through that crap. If they all got bitchy at the same time, we'd have to find a way to hole ourselves up in the tent until it passed."

"Which would lead to us eventually either getting alcohol poisoning or killing each other due to cabin fever." Harry said, nodding and grinning. "Whatever the case may be, it might be a good thing it's Ginny's turn. She gets angry."

"Indeed. Well then, shall we?" Malfoy asked.

"Let's."

As the two launched at one another, Ginny sat hunched over back near the campfire. Hermione was sat next to her, rubbing her back slowly and frowning.

"I don't care who the hell they pull out of those trees." Seethed the redhead. "If Harry doesn't kill 'em, I will!"

"I think it's safe to say we'll be able to handle this, Gin. If you want to go back to bed, feel free." Hermione said.

"No, no, I'm awake now. Hurting too much to drift back off!" Ginny growled. "They'd better hurry the hell up, though. Bad enough I'm cramping like a son of a bitch. I want to get some food in my stomach..."

"Want me to get some tea doing?" Asked Tonks.

"Please."

Tonks nodded and hopped into the girls' tent, coming back out a minute later with everything she needed. "Next time, us women are doing the planning. All for?"

"Aye!" Came the unified voices of the other four girls.

"And the two opposed are off being men, so we win." Tonks said, smiling happily as she levitated the pot over the campfire. "The rightful order is restored. Now let's hope they hurry so Ginny can go try to rest."

"TOO SLOW!" Malfoy suddenly yelled, causing the girls to look toward where the two were locked in combat. Harry had just been slammed back into one of the trees that at least one of the hidden people was luring dragged his wand against the ground as he rushed up and, jerking it up at the last second, howled, " *SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

Harry dodged to one side, neatly avoiding the attack while aiming a Sectumsempra of his own at the other tree that was hiding someone. The two trees shook violently with the force of the spells. And, as planned, a handful of people fell out, letting out surprised cries as they fell and collided with the earth.

Harry's tree had produced two of them, while Malfoy's only had one in it. The two rounded on their prey, wands aimed. Harry's voice promptly hitched in his throat as Malfoy muttered "You?!"

A strangled roar came from the camp site at that moment. The two teens turned to look, only to see Ginny Weasley storming over, wand drawn, a horrible fire in her eyes. Harry and Malfoy exchanged a quick glance, nodded at one another, and got the hell out of her way as she made her way over to her older twin brothers and screamed, "**WHAT ARE YOU IDIOTS DOING HERE?!**"

Fred and George, looking rather annoyed at being knocked out of their hiding spot, froze when they caught sight of their little sister. They knew what that expression meant. They had picked a very, very bad time to get roped into a rescue mission. Knowing they would never be forgiven for what they were about to do, the twins pointed at their leader, who was just getting to his feet, and stated, "Lupin made us come!"

Ginny whirled on Remus Lupin, who looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Taking a step back, he quickly said, "At least hear us out before you kill us?"

While Ginny's back was turned to them, Fred and George got Lupin's attention and began randomly pointing to their groins, pointing at Ginny, then doing a poor imitation of a dragon breathing fire on some hapless peasant. Lupin winced almost imperceptibly. He quickly looked to Harry, knowing full well that he might be their only hope for survival. But Harry and Malfoy were having a quiet conversation with one another.

Finally, Harry nodded to Malfoy and walked over, gently touching Ginny's shoulder. "C'mon, girl. Reel the fangs back in. Your mum'd kill you if you killed the twins. The immediate satisfaction would be overridden by the knowledge that she can get worse than you are right now. Right?"

Ginny sputtered for a moment, whirled back around, kicked Harry in the shin as hard as she could manage, and stomped back up to the camp site. She immediately ducked back into the girls' tent, with Hermione in close pursuit.

Yelping as he was kicked, Harry dropped to the ground, clutching his sore leg and watching Ginny make her egress. He turned and glared at the three spies. "I have three questions. I want them answered in

order. One, why the hell are you here? Two, how the hell did you track us? Three, give me one good bloody reason why I shouldn't go into that tent, tell Ginny she can do what she wants to you three, and sit down to breakfast while I watch?!"

Lupin sighed, walking over and helping Harry to his feet. "I think you know why we're here."

Limping as he lead the group back toward the fire, Harry muttered, "Albus sent you."

"Indeed. He wanted to send a group he knew you wouldn't attack." Lupin said.

Scowling, Harry growled, "Coward. Still pulling strings."

"Moony here tapped us to help him after Dumbledore cornered him at Number Twelve." George said, keeping his eyes on the tent his sister had vanished into.

"I'm surprised you lot are staying there." Tonks said. "Isn't it unsafe?"

"We don't think so." Lupin said. "You killed Severus, so we're assuming that it's safe, anyway. No one around to relay the information to the Death Eaters now, after all..."

"So he told you, huh?" Harry murmured, still rubbing his lower leg.

"I'm not sure he deserved death, but I won't sit here and admonish you for what you did." Said Lupin. "Personally, I would've rather seen him get thrown into Scrimgeour's new prison. He'd be better off rotting slowly and being driven mad."

"Mean streak, Moony?"

"He got Lily and James killed. You could say I still hold a grudge."

Sighing, Harry shook his head. "So? What now? We don't have enough room to accommodate two more. We barely have enough space for the seven of us as is."

"We have our own tent, though we haven't had much use of it. Wouldn't mind us setting it up next to your two?" Asked Lupin.

"Depends on what you plan to do with us." Harry said. "Albus sent you to bring us back, did he not?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean we're gonna." Fred stated. "Gave us an excuse to join in on the adventure. Life's been strangely boring since leaving Hogwarts. Figured we could use a bit of the old excitement!"

"You say that. But how do I know you *mean* it?" Asked Harry, suddenly looking as tired as he felt. "I'd *like* to trust you, you have to believe me. I just don't know if I *can*. You understand, right?"

"We do, Harry." Lupin said. "We have all day to talk, now that you've found us out. I was going to be content on merely observing unless you needed assistance. Ask us questions until you're satisfied, if you'd like."

Harry groaned. "Damn it. I've been watching you three all bloody night. You may have all day, but I feel about as good as Ginny looks right now. She isn't the only one who just wants to curl up under some blankets."

"I *told* you I heard something." George hissed, nudging Fred in the side. "You owe me a galleon."

"Shit." Fred swore, making a face.

"You want to sleep, but you don't want to leave potential enemies alone with your friends." Lupin said. "I'm obviously not big on the idea, but you could always petrify us while you sleep. We won't be able to do much in that condition."

Harry made a noise somewhere between a groan and a whine. "A little good luck now and then would be nice. No, no. I'll stay up and ask questions. Just expect me to pass out when I'm good and finished..."

Chuckling quietly, Lupin nodded. "Then let's not waste anymore time. Though if that's tea, I wouldn't mind a cup. You'd be surprised how thirsty not moving can make you."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

It was almost noon by the time Harry had retreated back to his tent, barely able to hold his eyes open. Lupin and the twins checked out. Not only were they the real deal, none of them were really keen on working forDumbledore . They had allowed Harry entry into their thoughts to prove that. It had been more than enough for him to finally declare them safe to travel with. He had outlined the plans for the following day to them. They would be making the final jump at dawn.

The church Harry had read about was close enough that, with a bit of a push, he could get them there in one go. This, however, didn't include the new arrivals. Harry told them the location and showed them what the spot looked like in one of the books they had brought with him. Lupin had said that they would be able to catch up fairly quickly, though it might be late afternoon before they turned up.

Whatever happened the rest of the day, Harry didn't care. He slept clear until the next day's morning. Waking up, he groaned under his breath. His mouth felt dryer than a desert. Slipping as quietly as he could from bed, he made a beeline for the fridge to get something cold to drink from it. Cracking the soda open as he stepped outside, he idly took note of the third tent sitting across from the two Harry had brought with him.

He sat down next to the long-dead campfire and drank his pop in silence. It would probably be the last bit of peace he could enjoy for a good while. For the next hour, he nursed the can of soda as though the last drop would signify his own life. But he knew the peace would eventually come to an end. Lupin and the twins were the first to wake, thoughMalfoy was close behind. Ginny was the last to wake up, which wasn't unexpected. She still wasn't very happy at having to get up so early to make the final jump, but she reported feeling better than the previous day.

Once everyone was ready, Harry bid Lupin and the twins a good day and made the jump with his group. It was a bit of a stretch, but Harry managed to get them to their destination without too much trouble. When they landed, above all else, Harry took note of the dull ache coming from his scar. No doubt about it, despite the Death Eaters fiddling about further east, Voldemort was still somewhere in the general area.

"Bit of a creepy spot, isn't it?" Hermione asked, glancing around.

Through the trees to the south, the church was visible. On the side closest to Harry and his group was a graveyard. The church looked as though it could have been blown over in a strong wind. It was crumbling in many places and plantlife grew all over it. Several of the graves in the graveyard seemed disturbed. One headstone had been crushed by a bit of debris coming down from the church itself.

"Maybe." Harry muttered, dropping to the ground and keeling over onto his back. "But this is where we make our stand from. Scar's hurting. We're gonna need to be mindful of our surroundings. If I'm close enough for my scar to be hurting, we're close enough to be attacked. There's no way of knowing if Riddle's got some kind of wards surrounding his base of operations or not. For all I know, he might know exactly where we are right now. We're sleeping in shifts. Might want to wait for the others to get here before divvying them up, though."

"So what do we do from here?" Asked Malfoy, drawing his wands and clearing the new campsite.

"First thing we do is wait for my stupid ass to recover from this jump. After that, I want to scout out that church to make sure it's safe. Just because I can't detect anything inside doesn't necessarily mean anything. If it's fine, we move inside it and make *that* our new headquarters while we're here. At the very least, we'll be able to move outside the tents and not have to worry about the elements as much. Plus it makes for a better defensible spot." Harry murmured, closing his eyes. "...Ugh, okay, can't be doing that or else I'll bloody well drift off on the ground."

Pushing himself to his feet, Harry stumbled his way into the tent. Ginny was doing similar, whimpering about nausea. Malfoy sighed, giving the area a good once-over.

"I'm not one to get these feelings often, mind you, but does it feel a touch eerie here?" Asked the Slytherin, his brow creasing.

"Well we are near a cemetery with open graves while chasing after a man capable of raising the dead, Draco." Pansy said, walking over and patting her friend on the shoulder.

Scowling at her, Malfoy shook his head and explained himself better. "I mean aside from that. I feel like we're being watched. But Potter said he couldn't detect anyone. I dunno what that means."

"It might mean you're just getting to be like he is: overly paranoid." Hermione stated.

"Don't you have a book to be snogging right about now?" Malfoy groused.

"I beg your pardon?!"

"You heard me."

"Alright, children, time out." Pansy said, stepping between Malfoy and Hermione. "Draco, let's go get some wood. Granger, probably do good to go hold the Weasley girl's hair back while she pukes."

"What about me and Luna?" Asked Tonks.

"Mm... I dunno. Not much to get going until we collect some wood." Pansy said, tapping a finger against her chin. "Maybe round up stuff to cook for when me and Draco get back?"

"Will do. Luna, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather we get the ingredients from Harry's tent. I'd rather not have Gin ruining my appetite." Tonks said, glancing warily toward the tent Ginny and Hermione were now in.

"I think that plan sounds rather good." Nodded Luna, sagely. "I hope Ginny's stomach settles down before lunch. She really does need to eat more."

"Yeah. For me, I've never had sickness problems. In fact, I seem to get hungrier than usual when it's that time of the month. I dunno, maybe I'm just weird like that." Tonks said, motioning for Luna to follow her into the tent.

"Oh, I don't know. Often, I end up wanting rather terrible combinations of ice cream flavors. One time, daddy had to hunt down a blend of strawberry and haggis flavored ice cream." Luna said, her head tilting slightly.

Malfoy made a face as he and Pansy were left standing in the clearing. Glancing at her, he asked, "Do you sometimes feel like we're the only sane ones here?"

"What's this 'we' business? You're a loony." Pansy declared, grinning as she walked by Malfoy and toward the trees.

"I'm a loony?!" Repeated Malfoy, rushing to catch up. "How the hell am I a loony?"

"You and Granger were together, weren't you?" Pansy asked, smirking.

Malfoy opened his mouth, paused, then frowned. "...Damn. I can't argue that. Can't we just blame that on temporary insanity, though? After all, you were with Potter for a time."

"Hm. Well, tell ya what - I'm fine letting the subject drop if you are." Pansy stated, throwing an arm around Malfoy's shoulders and grinning.

"Oh, very well. You're intolerable, you know that?"

"I take it as a compliment."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

**Author's Notes:** As I'm sure a lot of you know, I write stuff in advance and build up a buffer of chapters. For instance, as I type this, only six chapters of this book are up on FFN. So forgive the lateness of this question, but... what the hell is up with people thinking everyone in my story is still a virgin? I think I've given more than enough hints that Harry and Tonks are having sex. Just because I don't sit around writing lemon content doesn't mean it isn't occurring behind closed doors. The focus of the story has never been the romance, though I do enjoy the occasional fluff chapter. One of those will be approaching rather shortly, by the way. Just for those who dislike them, I figured I'd throw a warning out.

As for why there's not loads of snogging and sex in this story... I don't like reading garbage like that. That's why the most you'll get from me is WAFF-y fluff. The reason I started this series is because the ONLY Honks fics were effin' porn! I'm terribly sorry if you don't like slow building romance stories happening, but I cannot stand pairing fics where the characters divulge their eternal love for one another in the first chapter and things are all sunshine and lollipops thereafter. Romance is no fun without conflict! Go watch some soap operas. Hooking people up usually takes FOREVER and then there's always conflict occurring to keep it from becoming stale. That's exactly what's going on here.

Sorry for the rant, but it bugs me when I get reviews like that. The whole "They're teens so naturally they should be screwing like rabbits why aren't they here?!" thing pisses me off to no end. They aren't because that isn't the focus, nor should it be. That's a tool used to draw in horny teens who want to read about their favorite characters and their sex lives. Sorry, I have better stuff to be typing up. Like PLOT elements. You know, for the STORY I am trying to write. Imagine.

There are plenty of other stories on FFN if the lack of sex and making out isn't doing it for you. I suggest going to find those instead. I really don't want that type of person reading my fics to begin with. They weren't designed with your type in mind. In fact, they were designed opposite. If you're that horny that you absolutely must search the internet for fictional characters getting it on, there are plenty of resources out there. So GO 'out there' and leave my fic alone.



## Chapter 11 – The Lich King

When Harry woke up, it was the following morning. Coughing as he sat up, he rubbed at his aching back and started to move from under the covers. Tonks shifted next to him, but didn't wake up. With a groggy smile, Harry slid out of bed and headed into the living room, rubbing at his eyes. Malfoy was already up and was sitting on the couch, gazing somewhere just over the top of the book he had open. It wasn't until Harry got himself something to drink and walked over that he seemed to realize he wasn't alone anymore.

"How long have you been in here?" Malfoy asked.

"Not long. You're up early." Harry commented, sitting in one of the chairs.

"We had a little incident last night." Malfoy said, closing the book and setting it aside. "It's why we decided to let you sleep through the night. We weren't sure if we would have a fight on our hands and we wanted you to be in as close to prime condition as possible should it happen."

"What happened? Death Eaters spotted?" Asked Harry.

"Dunno. Someone was going in and out of the church all night, though." Malfoy said, eyes narrowing. "The werewolf said something wasn't right, so we all held back. He put up some protective wards to keep our tents hidden, so don't worry about that. But the Weasley twins are still out there, keeping watch. They relieved me, but I wasn't able to go to bed. Mind's been working too hard. God help me, I seem to be picking up your bad over-analyzation habits."

"Moony thought something wasn't right? Did he expound?" Harry murmured, taking a sip of the soda he had.

"No, but I think he had an inkling of an idea. You could see it in his eyes. He probably just didn't want to worry us." Malfoy said, stretching his arms out along the back of the couch. "If I were you, I'd have a talk with him. Preferably right now, before the others get up."

"What do you think?"

"I think it was one of Voldemort's men, personally. We couldn't see over there that well, but the figure seemed to move strangely. Take from that what you will."

Harry took another sip and nodded, setting his can down and standing. "I'll go get changed and see if I can get Fred and George to fetch Moony for me, then. You planning to get any sleep, Draco?"

"Unlikely. If you plan to inspect the church, I want to tag along." Malfoy said, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. "Something's not right over there. The guy went in, he came out about a half hour later. Fair bit of time passed before we saw him again. That time, he went in and stayed in, so chances are high he's still in there, whoever he is."

"Think he has any idea we're here?" Asked Harry.

"Doubtful. I stepped out of the ward's range and couldn't see the tents. I'm sure the werewolf knows what he's doing. Doesn't look like the two of us will be doing any sparring for awhile, though." Malfoy said, his voice getting quieter as he spoke.

Smirking as Malfoy apparently started to drift off, Harry ducked back into his bedroom to change. The appearance of an unknown at the church was unexpected. That whoever it was was still over there even more so. He assumed the twins were keeping a close eye on the place, so he wasn't too worried. It was only one guy, after all. Even if it was one of Voldemort's top ranking Death Eaters, he would still be massively outnumbered.

As he finished dressing, he slid the locket around his neck, tucking it inside his shirt. Closing his eyes, he thought, 'Alright, Sirius. Let's see what the day has in store for me this time.'

oOoOoOoOoOo

Stepping out of the tent, Harry saw Fred and George loitering around the campfire, looking bored, but keeping an eye on the church. He

looked over and scanned the building, but nothing seemed out of place to him. With a sigh, he started toward the tent the twins and Lupin were sharing. As he passed them, Harry asked, "Is Moony still awake?"

"Should be." Said George.

"He's getting a might bit edgy." Fred commented, glancing away from the church. "I think there's a full moon approaching or something. Neither of us bothered looking before we left."

"Seems agitated about something, Remus does." George added, nodding at his brother. "Probably the whole ordeal here. None of it's any good."

"Lotta bad juju comin' from this place." Fred stated, leaning forward against his knees. "We're out of our element here."

"All of us are." Harry said. "With any luck, we won't be here any longer than we need to be. Have you two seen anyone coming or going from the church since you took over for Draco?"

"Not a damn thing, mate." Fred said, rubbing at his eyes and scowling. "George and I were just talking about whether or not our unknown target is a vampire or not. He ducked in before dawn and hasn't been seen since."

"The sun shouldn't do anything to vampires." Harry said. "Leon always did fine. Besides, with the tree covering this thick, not a whole lot of light's getting through, anyway. Even if he was bothered by the sun, he should only get injured via direct exposure. Things are thick enough overhead that he'd have to deliberately run into an open patch. I'm gonna go talk this over with Moony, get his thoughts. I'll take over and get breakfast started when I come back out."

"Thinking of leading a group over there later if Remus thinks it's a good idea?" Asked George.

"Gonna go over there whether or not he thinks it's a good idea." Harry said. "Just want to hear his thoughts. Draco said that Moony thought something was off. I'm gonna find out what. Back in a few."

Harry ducked into Lupin's tent, finding him sitting in one of the room's chairs, staring up at the ceiling and making a face. Harry stood just inside the room for awhile, waiting to see if the werewolf would greet him. When he didn't, Harry shrugged and stepped further into the room, intent to sit and begin the conversation himself. But just as he'd reached the other chair, Lupin's eyes shifted down and he asked, "I assume you're here because you want more details?"

"Good morning to you too, Moony." Harry said, sitting and crossing his legs. "I wouldn't mind a bit more. What'd you sense?"

"Nothing living, I know that much." Lupin said, letting his eyes wander back upward. "What that means, I'm not sure. Our dealings with the undead have been low. The attack on Number Twelve was the biggest encounter we've seen, and that didn't tell us much. If this was some kind of undead creature of Voldemort's design, then he's gotten better at making them. This one came and left a few times. I can't sense a damn thing right now, which bothers me even more. He went into that building and not long after, I couldn't sense anything there. I don't know what that means and it's been eating away at my mind since."

"The church could simply have some kind of barriers or wards on it." Harry said.

"We tested. Granted, it was from over here, behind a ward of our own, but the readings shouldn't lie. And there was decidedly nothing wrong with the church." Lupin said.

"Think it's possible whoever or whatever it was is still in there?" Asked Harry.

"I'm positive of it." Lupin muttered, squeezing his eyes shut briefly. "I assume you want to go look?"

"Later. If he hasn't left by now, chances are he isn't going to for awhile. Let's have some breakfast first. Draco said he wants to go with me, and I'm trying to decide if he's the only other one I want with me." Harry said.

"Sexism from you, Harry? I'm shocked." Lupin said, a faint smirk on his face.

"It has nothing to do with that." Harry replied, scowling. "The bigger number we travel in, the more dangerous it gets. I want you and the twins to guard the girls, plain and simple. Even if all of them were up to Draco's level - which is entirely possible, as I haven't seen any of them fight in a good while - the last thing I want is for something to get the drop on us. If it's just me and Draco, I won't be worrying as much. Less worrying equals less thinking. I can focus better."

"So why bring them at all if you never plan to let them fight for themselves?" Asked Lupin.

"I wanted to keep them close. Leaving them in Albus' care would have been dangerous. Even with the near-constant bickering going on between Hermione and Pansy, it's better than having them back at Hogwarts. Albus knows where the Pit is located, he could easily use them as hostages to get me to return. I'm just trying to do this rationally, Moony. Right now, Ginny's probably the strongest of the lot, and not just because she's been having feminine issues this week. When she gets mad, she gets mad. Mad in a focused-combat sort of way. I guess it was forged through the fact that she's the youngest and only girl Molly and Arthur had." Harry explained.

"And the others?"

"Not sure about Nym's combat skill these days. I doubt I'd be able to spar with her. I'd be too worried I'd hurt her. But I'm sure she and Luna both could hold their own in a real fight, though. Hermione, on the other hand, I'm not so sure about." Harry said, looking troubled.

"Oh? Why's that?" Asked Lupin, who finally sat up properly.

"She's book smart, Moony. Very, very intelligent. But high intelligence doesn't necessarily translate to high combat ability. She's more use as a tactician, and even that's questionable. Aside from her bickering going on due to Draco's love life being ridiculous, I overheard her talking to the others about how she thought my methods were cruel. This was just after I killed Snape and his buddies." Harry said. "She's my friend, Moony, but sometimes I wonder."

Lupin nodded slowly. "She wasn't made for this kind of thing. She'd be more happy learning things by the number and going on to be the type of innovator that creates new spells and discovers new things. She never struck me as the type to be on the frontlines of battle. Do you think it's getting under her skin now that she's seen you mean business and that things aren't going to be solved by talking them through?"

"I dunno." Harry said, rubbing the bridge of his nose slowly. "I'd like to think she could be there if I needed her to be, but..."

"What about the Parkinson girl?" Asked Lupin.

"If Ginny wasn't the strongest, Pansy would be. Pansy can think on her feet. I daresay she and Draco have grown up sparring with each other just to test one another's abilities. Not too worried about her." Harry said.

"So, when do you plan to go on your little adventure?" Asked Lupin.

"Probably ten or eleven, once our food's settled a little. Dunno if we might be fighting, and it wouldn't do well for anyone to get hit in the gut and throw up during a battle." Harry said, chuckling. "So you think we're gonna be dealing with the undead again, huh?"

"Pretty positive." Lupin said, nodding again. "But be alert for anything. We're a good deal away from the church and it was only due to the wind being in our favor that I caught scent of him anyway. Smelled like... dirt and rotting flesh..."

"Lovely. I'm sure that was a nice pick-me-up overnight." Harry muttered, wincing slightly.

"Oh, it was a wonderful stench, I assure you." Grumbled Lupin.  
"Sometimes I really hate having enhanced senses..."

"Don't blame you at all, Moony. You should probably get some sleep, you know." Harry said, standing up.

"Probably, yes. Going to get breakfast started?"

"Yeah. Want anything?"

Lupin paused, weighed his options, then shook his head and stood as well. "I think I'll go try to sleep. If nothing else, I can rest my eyes for a few hours. It won't be quite as good as real sleep, but it's better than nothing."

"Your eyes won't be burning all morning, in any case." Harry said.  
"Good luck. I'll tell Fred and George to be quiet when they come in."

"Thanks. Good luck out there, Harry. I want to be woke up before you leave, but that's easier said than done. Little over two weeks until the next full moon. I'll have to take my leave for awhile once that happens. Hopefully nothing important will be occurring around then." Lupin said, heading for one of the bedrooms.

"Hopefully. Hopefully, but not bloody likely. Not with my luck." Harry said. "Goodnight, Moony. Or... good morning. Whatever."

"And to you, Harry." Lupin said, lifting a hand to wave over his shoulder as he vanished into the bedroom. "Good morning and good hunting."

oOoOoOoOoOo

"Now then," Harry said, finishing his little recount of the night's events for his now-gathered friends. "This is what's gonna happen. Draco and I are going to go investigate the church. I don't want to hear any complaining about this, either. Until I can spar with the rest of you to gauge exactly how strong you are, I'm not comfortable bringing you

with me. Starting to regret not setting up a rotation every morning so that I could do that before we got here..."

"Hindsight is twenty-twenty, huh?" Mumbled Malfoy.

"Something like that." Harry said. "The next thing I want to say is this, and listen up because it's important. If Draco and I don't come back right away, do not come searching for us. Give us a few days. If we don't return after a week, then you can start hunting us down. While I was waiting for everyone to wake up, I send a light clone over there. There's a secret path down some stairs inside of it. I sent it down them, but it was pitch black. Its light couldn't cut through the darkness. Then it was gone. It was there one minute, then poof - no more. So it encountered resistance of some sort. Something strong enough to dispel one of my light clones is no joke."

"So you're just venturing into the unknown headfirst instead of, oh I don't know, blasting the church apart, finding the secret path down after clearing the rubble, then just blowing huge chunks out of the ground until you get to the bottom?" Asked Hermione, her voice dry.

"Contrary to popular belief, I'm above needless destruction." Harry replied, glaring at the Gryffindor girl. "Draco, you ready?"

"Not really. Let's go." Malfoy said, getting to his feet and stretching.

"Any questions or comments from you lot?" Asked Harry, glancing at the girls and the twins, who both looked rather sleepy.

"Be careful." Tonks said, gnawing at her lower lip. "No telling what you'll encounter, yeah?"

"Yeah. Don't worry - Draco and I are survivors. We've been up against worse than a darkness spell and some powerful wards." Harry said, smirking. "You lot take care. Might train with one another while you're waiting for us to return. Aside from giving you something to do aside from worrying, it'll let you all get accustomed to one another's spellcasting. Might work out some routines or something, I dunno. Might try wrestling good spells outta Moony. I'm sure he knows a few useful tricks."

"Better not get yourself killed, Draco." Pansy commented. "I'll never forgive you if you do."

"Relax, would you?" Malfoy scoffed. "You lot are acting like we're leaving for Azkaban again. It's a church. A church with some secrets to it, sure. But it isn't like Voldemort's set up camp under it."

"Yeah, it doesn't feel like him at all." Harry said, nodding slowly. "We'll be fine."

"You always say that." Ginny commented.

"Indeed I do!" Harry chimed, turning and slapping Malfoy on the shoulder. "Come, idiot. Let's get to adventuring!"

Malfoy glared at Harry, turning and following after him. "Be glad I'm above fistfighting, Potter. Otherwise you'd have a black eye. Or worse. Depends on how well I could aim a kick at a moving target. Call me an idiot again and I'll hex your bits off, though."

"Noted." Harry said, chuckling. "Good to see you not being so serious about my snide little remarks anymore. Takes a tough skin to hang around me, y'know!"

Snorting, Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, the great Harry Potter, asshole extraordinaire. He might call you childish names! Be warned, everybody! He's bound to call you an idiot, buffoon or, if you've really angered him, a dunderhead!"

"Alright, enough lip from you." Muttered Harry.

"Less talking, more walking, wandlicker." Malfoy said, striding past Harry, who sputtered and started arguing back.

"They're gonna end up killing each other one of these days." Pansy stated, shaking her head.

"That or becoming lovers behind our backs." Tonks lamented, sighing melodramatically.

"Eugh..." Groaned the twins. Fred made a face and asked, "Would you two not make us think about something like that?"

"I know I shouldn't ask, but why'd Malfoy call Harry a wandlicker?" George asked, bracing himself in advance.

"Well," Tonks began, tilting her head and looking thoughtful. "Harry and Draco were rolling around on the ground awhile back..."

"Yeah, and Draco finally had Harry pinned down." Pansy continued. "So Harry leans back into him, got this utterly submissive look on his face, and licked the tip of Draco's wand."

The twins immediately dissolved into making violent retching noises. They were only silenced by one of Ginny's glares. Easing her expression as she glanced towards Pansy and Tonks, she muttered, "Would you tell them the real story, please?"

"Oh, fine." Tonks pouted. "Spoilsport. They were having a duel at the time and Harry used that little trick to escape losing."

"Draco looked so adorable when he was blushing and trying to figure out what had happened." Pansy said, grinning.

"That isn't much better, but at least it doesn't make my skin crawl." Fred said, still looking like he would never be able to eat again.

oOoOoOoOoOo

"Did you see our little friend while you were traipsing around in here, Potter?" Asked Malfoy as he and Harry stepped into the crumbling church. So much of the inside was a wreck that it was barely discernible as a church. The room was covered in chunks of building and grass and other plantlife was growing all over the place. A few bookcases lined the back wall of the single, large room, one of which looked slightly crooked.

"Nope. My guess is that whoever it was, he went down those stairs. Makes me wonder what the hell is down there." Harry said, carefully

stepping through the rubble, his eyes darting all around. There was no telling whether or not the place was trapped. The last thing he needed was to have the building explode or collapse in on them. "Wouldn't happen to know any good wardbreaking hexes, would you?"

"I know combat-oriented spells. Should've brought Granger along if you wanted technical knowhow." Said Malfoy, following carefully in Harry's footsteps. As they drew closer to the crooked bookshelf, he murmured, "Tell me it isn't just me. You feel like we're being watched, Potter?"

"I always feel like I'm being watched." Harry said. "But yes, I feel it, too."

"Think anyone's invisible?"

"Possibly."

Malfoy glanced around the room, held his wands out in different directions, and hissed, "Accio invisibility cloak!"

But nothing came flying toward him, even as he turned slightly and repeated the incantation. For nearly a minute, Malfoy and Harry aimed and tried to get an invisibility cloak from someone. But it never came to them. When they were satisfied that they were alone in the room, their attention turned back on the bookshelf was was misaligned with the rest. Stepping up to it, Harry motioned for Malfoy to help him move it. Grabbing hold of it at the top and bottom, the two slowly swung it out, as it appeared to be hinged to the wall, guarding the secret passage behind.

"Okay, new fact turned up." Harry said, panting slightly and staring at the bookshelf. "That was heavy as hell."

"Brilliant mind, yours." Malfoy commented.

"Shut up, I'm not done yet. There was only one guy, right? The hell'd he move this on his own?" Asked Harry.

"Probably spelled it open." Malfoy said, shrugging. "Not out of the question."

"Maybe. But why was it ajar, then?"

Malfoy turned to look at the spot where the wood hinged to the wall. "Unsure. You'd think he would have secured it behind himself. Just in case. Well, looks like there's only one way to try finding the answers to our questions. After you, fearless leader."

"Enough with the names." Groused Harry, stepping into the passageway with his wands at the ready. The staircase was narrow and spiraled downward at a fairly steep angle. With the visibility rapidly decreasing as they ventured in, it made for slow going. "Another new fact - no one's going to be running up or down these very fast."

"Meaning if something's waiting for us, we're in trouble." Malfoy said.

"Pretty much." Harry confirmed. "...I really hate to ask you this, especially with the argument we had on the way open, but you'd better grab hold of me."

"Not a chance, Potter."

"Dammit, Malfoy, would you just do what I ask? I want to make sure we stay together down here. I dunno if these stairs diverge at any point or not, and the further down we go, the quieter we're likely to get. I need to know you've still got my back." Harry said.

"...Fine. But you don't get to use this in any smart-mouthing remarks down the line. Understand?"

Rolling his eyes, Harry nodded. Realizing quickly that Malfoy wouldn't be able to see the gesture, he replied, "Yes, Draco. I won't bring it up. What happens in this cramped little stairway to hell remains here."

Pocketing Solieu's wand, Malfoy reached out and clasped hold of Harry's left shoulder. Feeling slightly more confident, Harry continued

leading the two of them down the stairway. Eventually, they reached the spot Harry remembered his light clone getting dissipated at.

"Right here." He commented. "This is as far as my clone got. I'm not feeling anything out of the ordinary, though. You?"

"Nothing." Malfoy said. "Keep going."

"Right." Harry said. He continued on, never running into any form of resistance. This only served to confuse Harry further. Clearly, his clone had slammed into something strong around there. But if it was strong enough to do that, surely it would be readily detectable, even without spells. Something about this horrible little spiral stairway was starting to get under Harry's skin. He didn't like it when he ran into things he couldn't figure out.

It felt like an hour had passed before a change occurred. A chill wind suddenly blew up from further down. And, for a brief, heart-stopping second, Harry wondered if he hadn't made the Dementors fully extinct. But then the wind flew past them again and he relaxed somewhat. From behind him, he could hear Malfoy mutter something under his breath. Not wanting to get chatty when they might encounter an enemy at any moment, Harry remained quiet.

The final step was jarring, as he wasn't able to tell it was the final step. So when he took his next step down, he wasn't prepared to actually come in contact with a real floor again. He stumbled slightly, causing Malfoy to crash into his back, their heads cracking together and causing them both to let out yelps of pain.

"What the hell was that for?!" Harry cried.

"Nearly causing me to fall on top of you!" Malfoy argued.

"I fail to see the problem here. I'd be the one on bottom!" Harry snapped. "You, on the other hand, would use meas a pillow!"

"So long as you make a better pillow than a leader, I'm all for it!" Malfoy stated.

Pausing and taking a deep breath, Harry resumed talking in a less frustrated tone. "Look, we know there's a bottom now. Let's go back up and tell the others what we've found out."

"Which would be what? 'Hey, we found what we went there seeking and there was a bottom to it'?" Asked Malfoy, still sounding waspish.

"If you'd rather stay down here, gripping tightly at my shoulder..." Harry said, glaring in what he thought was Malfoy's general direction.

"Someone had to stop your constant shaking." Malfoy said, sounding smug.

"Shaking?! Listen, you..." Harry began. He never got to finish his comeback, however, as he found something cold and sharp pressed up against his throat. Quickly after, several more sharp objects were poking into his body from various angles. He could only assume Malfoy was suffering the same thing he was, as the blonde had gotten rather quiet.

Through the inky blackness came a quiet, rattling voice. "Who are you?"

When the object against his throat had pulled back slightly, Harry responded, "My name is Harry Potter. This is Draco Malfoy. We're here to investigate the church. We were in the area in preparation for fighting Voldemort and his Death Eaters when we saw someone coming and going from it and wanted to know where he went."

There was a pause before the voice then croaked, "Can you prove who you are?"

"Can you see in this darkness?" Asked Harry.

"I can."

"Look at my forehead, then - at my scar." Harry said.

There was another short pause before the voice spoke once again. "Take them to the holding cells!" It barked. "I will report our findings."

The sharp objects against their backs gave a sudden jab, forcing Harry and Malfoy to begin walking again. Harry, who was still gripping his wands, decided that enough was enough. He didn't know who was trying to take them hostage, but he wasn't going to let it happen. But something was wrong. When he went to try and disarm the weapons from their attackers, nothing occurred. The realization came crashing into him like a ton of bricks. That had been an anti-magic ward his clone had run into. It was impossible to detect normally, since it didn't actively become obvious unless you were trying to perform magic within it.

With a low growl, he put his wands away, moving very slowly so that the men with the pointed objects wouldn't think he was trying anything funny. Within his head, Harry could hear Balthazar quietly swearing. It was a basic trap and they had fallen right into it. Now they were being taken away to who-knew-where. But there was still an oddity - they were still allowed their wands. Even within an anti-magic field, surely their enemies weren't so foolish as to allow them their own weapons.

They walked for a few minutes before being shoved roughly. Not suspecting a sudden change of movement, both Harry and Malfoy both slammed into the ground. Harry let out a sharp hiss and clutched at his right elbow, which had contacted the ground before the rest of him. Next to him, he could hear Malfoy making a similar sound. There was an odd noise that sounded exactly like ancient, metal bars clanging together before one of their captors spoke.

"Now just stay there and be good. This shouldn't take long."

Whatever definition of 'shouldn't take long' that person had used wasn't the same one that Harry or Malfoy were fond of. It was nearly three days later - by Malfoy's estimate - that they heard someone approaching their holding cell. The footsteps were heavy and noisy as they grew closer. Even with three days in the darkness, neither of the teens' eyes had adjusted to it, proving to them that it was, in fact, a magically-induced darkness. No amount of adjusting would allow them to see within it.

A long silence followed after the footsteps came to a halt outside their cell. Finally, a deep, growling voice asked, "Have I really caught the infamous Harry Potter?"

"You have." Harry said, his voice having gotten scratchy from the lack of anything to drink.

"Nullify the darkness." Commanded the man. Almost at once, light flooded the room, causing both Harry and Malfoy to suck in sharp, surprised breaths as their eyes were overloaded. When Harry was finally able to open his eyes without his brain protesting the light, he glanced over and out the bars of his cell at the person who had been speaking to him.

The man was wearing a long, dark grey robe that was tattered and patched in many places. His face was obscured by a hood, and the only part of it visible were the two glowing eyes. He was quite tall, looking to be almost 7ft high at least. His weight was what surprised Harry most, as it didn't seem to match the footsteps he had heard. He had assumed the person approaching to be rather large. On the contrary, the man before him looked almost abysmally thin, as Solieu had been in the year before his death. On either side of the man were two equally thin guards, each carrying spears.

Pulling open the door to Harry and Malfoy's cell, the man in the middle stepped in and knelt a few feet away from Harry, staring at them in turn. There was something unnerving about that, though Harry wasn't able to place why. Finally, the man reached up and, with glove-covered hands, pulled his hood back. Almost at once, Harry understood what was taking place now. The man had greying hair that hung limp around his gaunt face, which was a sickly color as well. A mask of sorts was wrapped around the lower half of his face. His eyes seemed empty, save for the glow coming from within them.

Slowly getting back to his feet, the man reached out to Harry, offering him a hand up. "I see by the look on your face that you at least have some indication of who I am?"

"I believe I do..." Harry said, staring at the hand offered to him and hesitating.

"Just the same, I believe a proper introduction - and an apology - is in order. My name is Sergei Wagner, though most seem to prefer calling me the Lich King these days. Come with me, the both of you. If you truly are who you claim to be, then we have much to discuss. Ur'terash may have a use for you."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: And so Wagner is properly introduced. And after holing Harry and Malfoy up for a few days. How rude!

Not much to say here, save that the next chapter is bound to be rather fun. We're going to have us another fight scene, kids. Though how big it ends up being depends on how much I alter the chapter from what it is in the chapter guide. In any case, fun times are ahead and Harry ends up in yet another battle. The big question this time is: Who with?

Seeya later, kids.

## Chapter 12 – Out of Darkness

Four days and counting.

That was how long it had been since Harry and Malfoy had entered the church. That was how long it had been since they had last heard from them. There had been no outward signs of any form of disturbance, and all present knew that if Harry and Malfoy had gotten into a fight, they would have known. But the group did what they had been asked: they waited. For days, they waited, keeping a rotating watch on the church that the boys had entered. Time passed slowly, with everyone present worrying about the two, unsure whether or not they were alright.

On the fifth day, however, something finally happened. It was around lunchtime when Tonks awoke half the camp by screaming that 'they were back.' True enough, Harry and Malfoy were approaching, talking to each other and looking none the worse for wear. Their clothes even seemed to be in top shape, something no one had really been expecting. All present assumed that the two had been captured by some force or another and they would have to battle their way back out.

Tonks rushed up to Harry and nearly pounced him to the ground with the force she launched at him. "WHERE WERE YOU?!"

Staggering, but somehow managing to keep upright, Harry simply smirked. Kissing the top of Tonks' head, he murmured, "Planning things. But he'll be explaining that soon enough. Come on, let's get over to the rest. Everyone seems to be awake."

"With Tonks' yelling, how could we not be?" Yawned George.

Harry glanced at Malfoy, who nodded. Excusing himself for a moment, Harry went and ducked into his tent. Watching him go, Malfoy then turned back toward the group. "How much time has passed? It was difficult to tell."

"Five days now." Pansy commented, looking like she wanted to either hug Malfoy or pummel him to death.

"Hm... longer than we should've taken. Nothing to be done about that, I guess." Malfoy said. As Harry stepped back out of his tent, the Slytherin faced him and asked, "I still don't see why you need to prepare. We both know it won't take you long on your own."

"Perhaps." Harry replied. He had slipped his ouroboros cloak back on and was working on getting it clasped in the front. "But in the off chance he's changed things around, I may need to hang back for awhile." He glanced up. "Will you be alright minding things here?"

"Of course." Malfoy said.

Harry walked up, raising his right hand up in front of his face. "Keep them safe, then."

Smirking, Malfoy brought his own hand up to meet Harry's. "Don't get yourself slaughtered, Potter."

Closing his eyes and chuckling, Harry said, "I've fought worse."

"Yes, but never like this." Malfoy murmured.

"Well then. Sorry I have to leave so soon, everyone. But I've got work to do. Draco will explain everything after I've left, I'm sure. I should be back by nightfall if everything goes well. If not... well, I'll think of something." Harry said, letting the Patronus Armor wash over him. And, as he started to shift out, he added, "If he sends a messenger while I'm gone, inform them that he'll have his artifact by week's end at the latest."

"Will do." Malfoy said. Smirk slowly leaving his face, he narrowed his eyes. "Good luck."

An unnaturally long grin split Harry's face as he vanished from sight. Staring after him for awhile, Malfoy shook his head slowly and went to sit down near the fire. Blowing out a sigh as he did so, he groaned, "I thought I'd never feel warm again..."

"Would someone mind telling us what the ruddy hell's going on?" Fred asked, looking irritated. "You two go into a church, vanish without a trace for days, come back, then Harry takes off after being mysterious as usual. We need substance, Malfoy!"

"If you don't stop being so damn noisy, I'll throw you down there and let Wagner's people do with you what they will." Malfoy said, glaring at the redhead.

"Wagner?" Lupin repeated, brow creasing. "Sergei Wagner? You made contact with..."

"Yeah. We ran right into the Lich King's city, apparently. Stairs led down a ways, we got ambushed by some undead soldiers, thrown into a holding cell for a good while, then were graced with his presence." Malfoy said. "It was about as fun as you'd imagine it to be, I'm sure."

"Wait, wait..." Lupin said, walking over and sitting near Malfoy. "Explain what happened properly, Draco. What went on down there?"

Rolling his eyes, Malfoy winced as he tilted his head, causing his neck to pop. "There isn't much to explain."

"I'd say there was." Argued Lupin. "You made contact with a powerful lich and his undead army and you're telling me there isn't much to explain? For starters, why did he let you go?"

"Look, it's quite simple. I'm only going to explain this once. I'm tired, I'm cold, I haven't had a decent thing to eat in days, and I'm still trying to process everything." Malfoy said, closing his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Sergei Wagner isn't exactly the kind of imposing figure you're all probably envisioning. Quite tall, yes, but he's covered in... I dunno, it's as though his flesh started to rot but never finished doing so. He isn't a walking skeleton, but he's not exactly healthy-looking, either..."

Trying to keep the warmth of the fire from lulling him to sleep, Malfoy continued, "After Wagner confirmed that Harry was who he was, we were led out of our cell. Wagner had a lot of questions for us. Why

we're here, why we were investigating the church, and so on. Turns out, Wagner isn't very happy with Voldemort being around, either."

"Why not?" Asked Ginny. "You'd think he'd be happy, what with all the new undead Voldemort's creating."

"That's just it, though." Malfoy said, cracking one eye open to look Ginny's way. "He's not. In fact, every stinkin' person down there hates being in the condition they're in. Pretty much all were raised by necromancers with chips on their shoulders. How would you feel if someone raised you from the dead? Can't imagine it's very pleasant. You'd be cursed with unlife, roaming the earth until someone managed to destroy you or you found a way to cure yourself. That's what Wagner's trying to do. He's trying to find a way to end the suffering his people are enduring."

"So the Lich King wants to kill Voldemort as well?" Asked Lupin.

"That's the long and short of it, yes." Malfoy said. "However, he can't really do anything. He needs to stay in Ur'terash - his city - and keep it safe. He told us Voldemort's already found a number of entry points to the city. Seems Voldemort wants to try and take command of all the free-thinking undead men and women that have been saved by Wagner. Most of his men aren't fighters. He's got guards, yes, but they're all volunteers. They want to make themselves feel useful. They're all grateful to Wagner for bringing them back from the madness of resurrection. It's only through Wagner's strength that they're still safe. He's one knight protecting a castle from a potential siege. What's he supposed to do?"

"But isn't he powerful?" Luna asked, tilting her head slightly. "Surely he has the strength to do major damage to Voldemort."

"Perhaps. But he's also aware of Voldemort's recent activities. He isn't entirely sure that Voldemort's trying to turn himself into a lich as well or whether it's something out. His spies reported overhearing some Death Eaters talking about Voldemort. Seems he's doing something in regards to transferring one's soul to another host. What that means is anyone's guess. If he's trying to create a lich from some random guy he's unearthed and brought back to life, he's gonna have

a hell of a fight on his hands." Malfoy explained. "Apparently once you bring someone back, it's pretty hard to kill them... or do much of anything else to them. As for Wagner's power..."

Malfoy was staring at the fire intensely now, looking rather troubled. The others around waited for him to finish, but he didn't seem to want to. It wasn't until Lupin spoke his name that he seemed to snap out of the daze he had fallen into.

"Hm?"

"You were mentioning Wagner's power." Lupin said.

"Yeah." Malfoy said. "I was."

"And?" Lupin pushed. "You seem to have some idea of how strong he is."

Scowling, Malfoy glanced toward the werewolf. "Wagner could tell Potter was strong. He wanted to see how strong, so he asked Potter to come at him with everything he had."

"And?" Hermione asked.

"Potter couldn't even tear Wagner's ratty robes. Whatever Potter tried to do, Wagner was able to block, dodge, or counter. I've never seen a fight like that. I'm surprised you people didn't feel the ground shaking. We must have been farther down than I realized. I've also never seen Potter look the way he did in that battle. Even though it was a simple show of power, Potter was taking it really hard. Literally, nothing he tried to hit Wagner with was able to connect. At one point, he flew off the handle and just charged at Wagner, blasting him at close range with every curse he could remember off the top of his head. He ended up destroying half the room, but he didn't ever hit Wagner. But that isn't the worst of it." Malfoy explained, staring back toward the fire.

"The worst?" Repeated Lupin.

"Wagner dropped Potter with a single, well timed attack. And he stayed down. For about seven hours, he just lied there on the floor, not moving. Wagner assured me he would be fine, save his bruised ego. I'm not so sure. Potter awoke and didn't look like he had given in to madness like he did during the fight, but..."

"You could tell it bothered him." Tonks finished quietly.

"Exactly. Potter wasn't happy. You know how he gets when he thinks he isn't strong enough to do something. But he masked his anger and we went about our business. Wagner came to our holding cell and said that the city might have a use for him. I think the power test was just that. He wanted to see if Potter would be strong enough to do what he wanted." Malfoy said.

"Which was?" Asked Fred.

"Getting some artifact. Something to do with helping his research division work on a cure for their condition, apparently. Dunno what the name was. It sounded vaguely Russian, though. Damned if I was going to try remembering that, as I wasn't the one who had to get it back. That's where Potter went. So, in a shortened explanation for everything that has happened, Weasley..." Malfoy said, looking over at Fred. "We met the Lich King, who asked Potter to go after some macguffin in exchange for help with fighting Voldemort. That good enough for you, or would you like me to break each part back down and explain those in finer detail?"

"No need to be snarky, Malfoy." Fred stated, glaring at the blonde. "So where is this artifact thing?"

"Back in Britain." Malfoy said, smirking strangely. "Being guarded."

"I'm not sure I want to know the answer to this, but... who's guarding it, Draco?" Asked Lupin, looking decidedly wary.

"The way it was explained to us, a young wizard - one who enjoyed collecting odd and rare items like this one - came to be its owner. However, the dealer who sold it to him had stolen it. As such, he didn't know the item was cursed. I guess the wizard tinkered with it to

much, triggered something, and ended up absorbing the item into his body. It was painful, apparently, but the wizard gained dominance over it and managed to squash any pain it was causing him." Malfoy explained.

"That's well and good," Lupin said. "But who has it?"

"You really need me to tell you?" Malfoy asked. "Very well, then. Since you seem to not want to believe it yourself. Harry's going back to Britain, specifically Hogwarts, and he's going to rip that thing straight out of Albus Dumbledore's body."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Burning through the magical currents, Harry's mind was going over countless scenarios. What would Dumbledore do to counter his attacks? Would the headmaster even fight back? How would he deal with the rest of the staff? Would the students get involved and, if so, how many? The sheer amount of possibilities going through his mind was almost distracting himself from his journey back, which got rocky at times.

"Are you sure this is the right way to go about things?" Came Balthazar's disembodied voice.

"I'm doing this to end a war." Harry replied, his voice echoing faintly. "The hourglass must be brought to Wagner in a show of friendship. I have to prove to him that I'm worth having as an ally. Having the entire city of the undead at our disposal, to say nothing of its ruler, would be the best possible thing to happen to us in months! I'm not going to pass this chance up, Balthazar. We're going to crash into the school and blow the god damn thing out of his body if we have to. The stage is being set. It's just a matter of time to see how many actors play a role."

"Perhaps. But can Wagner be trusted?" Asked the ghost.

"Assuredly." Harry said. "You heard his voice. You saw that look on his face. He wants nothing more than to simply grant his people the peace they've been so rudely denied. The hourglass will do them

more good than it'll do Albus. Merlin only knows why the old man has it. I hope the damn thing still makes him ache on cold mornings. This would be so much easier if it was in a museum somewhere. But no, it just had to be back with him. Why the hell does it seem like every turn I make, I end up running into that bastard? How many strings is he trying to pull at once? Surely he couldn't have known about this that far in advance!"

"Don't put much faith in seers, Harry?" Chuckled Balthazar.

"Fate is one's own to grasp. Relying on outside sources to lead you along by the hand will get you nowhere." Harry stated, eyes narrowing.

"What if everything is falling apart? Surely, one might turn to a higher power to believe in." Balthazar said. "...Of course, I realize the absurdity in that statement, being a ghost."

"If everything goes crazy, I'll believe in myself and keep fighting." Harry said. "We'll win this war, Balthazar. Our chances are getting better and better. But this is gonna hurt. This is gonna hurt like hell. He's a stubborn, irritating, controlling bastard, but he isn't feeble. Nor has he been slacking in his training. Fighting Albus Dumbledore is going to be... interesting."

oOoOoOoOoOo

In the Great Hall, dinner was well underway. For the students, life had been rather tense ever since Harry had both outed Dumbledore's mindset and killed their Potions Master. The latter of these had actually brought small celebrations to a select few throughout the school. However, no one dared speak too loudly of it out where they could be heard by the staff. Hogwarts had, in a way, become almost like a prison. Though Dumbledore and the other professors acted as though nothing was wrong, even the first years noticed just how poor Dumbledore was looking these days, as though his age had finally caught up to him.

Slytherin's table, in particular, looked rather feeble as of late. Between the Death Eaters' children leaving and Harry absconding

with Malfoy and Pansy, they were only being kept motivated by Blaise Zabini, who had taken it upon himself to watch over the younger students in his House. Though Professor Sinistra had become head of Slytherin House in Snape's absence, hardly anyone could connect to the woman, who seemed rather 'out there' for someone who used to be in Slytherin.

In addition, several students had overheard various faculty members speaking of 'the spies' that had been sent after Harry and his crew and how they hadn't returned. This hadn't set well with many, as they weren't idiots. They could connect two dots together and form a straight line. Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes had been closed ever since the talk first started. Many wondered why Dumbledore would do something like that, while others argued it was because of Harry's familiarity with Fred and George Weasley that they were sent out.

But time passed and classes occurred and meals were eaten, all without trying to think too much into the world's situation outside the school's walls. However, the outside world seemed to have a bad way of breaking in to forcefully inform them of its condition. This would be one of those nights. The last time Harry had appeared, it was to inform the headmaster that he had killed Snape.

When the creature of light appeared in the air over the center of the room, it immediately got everyone's attention. Dumbledore, flinching for the briefest of moments before slipping on a mask of indifference, rose to his feet.

"To what do I owe this visit, Harry?" He asked, his soft voice sounding like a scream in the silence that Harry's arrival had created.

The creature dropped to the ground, green eyes blinking a few times as it stared up at the headmaster. For a long, tense moment, no one in the room spoke. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the creature flickered and vanished from sight. Naturally, this put the rest of the staff on guard, ready to defend themselves should Harry suddenly appear near the staff table.

"I know you're still here." Dumbledore said, glancing around the room slowly. "Tell me why you've decided to disturb the peace of my school this time."

"What 'peace' do you think you have?" Asked Harry's disembodied voice.

"No attacks have occurred since the school year began, Harry." Dumbledore stated.

"Not to you, anyway." Spat Harry. "I, however, seem to almost be attracting people like a magnet. I've got bad news for you, Albus. Remus and the twins are on my side."

Harry shifted in, now that he was fairly certain no one would blast him on sight, appearing back near the doors leading into the room. He quickly dropped the Patronus Armor and, while he was leaning back, arms crossed, his wands were still in his hands. It was a fact not lost on the headmaster.

"I was afraid they would defect." Dumbledore admitted, raising his eyebrows. "But, as they say, it was worth a shot. I would appreciate it if you would answer my question."

Harry smirked. "I've come for the hourglass, Albus."

Whatever the headmaster might have been expecting Harry to say, that certainly hadn't been it. A look of outright shock washed over Dumbledore's face. After a moment of stunned silence, he asked, "How do you know about that?!"

"Simple..." Harry said, a grin spreading slowly. "Sergei Wagner told me about it."

"Sergei..." Dumbledore began to repeat, his pupils dilating.

"That's right. Me and the Lich King have finally made each other's acquaintance, Albus. And you know what? He's rather charming for being centuries old and having the distinct problem of being undead. Unlike the abomination you tried to make him out to be, Sergei

Wagner merely wants to be left alone. Voldemort is creating more like Wagner and his people; a people cursed with the indignity of unlife. Wagner wants to find a cure to end his peoples' suffering. He wants them to return to the peace that death brought. But the magic binding them to this world is too strong. And now Voldemort is creating more of these tortured souls. He's creating them using the crudest methods possible. The ghouls he's resurrecting are mindless wretches, capable of only attacking things. Wagner doesn't like that. Neither do I. No one should have to suffer that way." Harry explained.

"And you are working for him now?" Dumbledore asked.

"For? No, Albus. Because unlike how things work under your iron fist, Wagner respects those around him. I'm working with him. That's why I'm here." Harry said. Closing his eyes for a moment, he drew in a long, slow breath. "Albus, I don't want to fight you. I really don't want to fight you. Please... the hourglass is doing you no good, whereas for Wagner and his people, it could lead to a cure. I'm asking you, man to man, to let me have it. There's no reason to keep it. I know it causes you pain. All I want is to retrieve the artifact for Wagner to show him I'm trustworthy. I'll get out of your school, no bloodshed will occur, and we can all go about our business without having to resort to violence."

"I cannot, Harry." Dumbledore said, straightening up. "Even if I was capable of removing it, I would not let you have it."

"Why?" Asked Harry, keeping his tone light. "What harm could it do?"

"You do not know Sergei Wagner, Harry..." Began the headmaster.

"Oh? Don't I? I fought him, Albus." Harry said, looking unamused. "Wagner's stronger than I could hope to be. I don't think either of us really want to piss him off. This could be the key to ending this war, Albus. Wagner's got an army. We could march on Voldemort's encampments. He has the power to calm the tortured spirits within the resurrected bodies that Voldemort's making - I've seen him do it. He can help us, Albus, but he needs to know we're worth helping. Why won't you give me the hourglass? What do you mean 'even if you were capable of removing it'?"

"Sergei Wagner is little more than an animal, Harry." Dumbledore said, moving from his spot at the head of the staff table. "He may display a different attitude around you, but it is merely because he sees you as a tool. I thought you didn't wish to be seen as one of those."

"Wagner acknowledged my strength. He acknowledged how much power I have. He's offered to help teach me how to better command that power. He's offering to let us stay in his city until we can defeat Voldemort. He wants to stop Riddle's experiments as much as I do, if not more. I would appreciate it if you would answer my questions this time."

"The hourglass is dangerous, Harry." Dumbledore said.

"Is it more dangerous than me when I'm angry, Albus?" Harry asked, eyes narrowing to slits. "Is it more dangerous than the Lich King? I'm giving you a chance to do this peacefully. Tell me where the hourglass is. I can rip it out of you and heal the wound enough that you'll be fine until Madam Pomfrey can attend to you. Be the bigger man here, Albus."

"It isn't about who is the 'bigger man,' Harry." Dumbledore said.

"No. It's about petty fights. Old man, I'm giving you one last chance. Don't make me fight you. Because I won't hold back. If you don't hand the artifact over, I'll blast a hole in you and rummage around until I find it!"

"Minerva, please get the students to safety, would you?" Asked Dumbledore, reaching into his robes to pull out his wand. "Harry, I assume this is acceptable?"

Aiming a wand over his shoulder, Harry hit the twin doors to the room with a spell, causing them to shimmer. "No. It isn't. Don't act like a child, then try to hide it from the eyes of those around you. I'll allow the staff to protect them behind shields and I promise not to aim that way, even if you take the coward's way out and use them to your advantage. But I won't let them leave. If you really insist on fighting

when this could have ended peacefully, then they deserve to see the outcome."

"This is non-negotiable, Harry. Unlock the doors and let the staff escort the students away." Dumbledore said.

"Balthazar." Harry said, sighing as his arms dropped to his sides.

"Three minutes remain. Go." Balthazar replied.

Harry shifted across the room, coming in low. His hands reappeared near the ground, aimed up at the headmaster's knees. "Effringo!"

The headmaster's arm shot down the minute he detected where Harry was, bringing up a shield spell that absorbed Harry's attack. It lasted only a second, as the headmaster was busy working on a counterattack. But Harry's arms were encased in light and vanished from sight before he could finish.

"Come now, Harry. Not even a fair fight?" Dumbledore asked.

"A fair fight?" Harry asked. "When have you ever fought fair?" Shifting in behind the headmaster, Harry glared across the room. "You fight with nothing but dirty tricks and manipulation. Don't talk to me about fair fights, you bastard. After Voldemort's killed, I'm going to come back here and take you out. You've done enough damage to this world. I've only been a part of it a short time. I won't have you causing it's downfall!"

The two spun around quickly, wands aimed at one another's heads. Dumbledore's face finally had dropped the mask, showing an anger that Harry had only seen a few times in his life. Dumbledore started to move his wand arm, so Harry did the same. The two fired at the same time, but both managed to swiftly dodge out of the way. The spells collided harmlessly into the walls on either side of the room. As the two stared each other down again, the staff took their chance and abandoned the staff table, quickly wrangling the students towards the back half of the room.

"A threat on someone's life is a serious offense, Harry." Dumbledore said, his voice cold.

"It's your own fault. I was willing to try and end this without resorting to this. But you have it in your head that I'm the bad guy now. Tell me, Albus, how do you sleep at night, knowing that the dead are being brought back, screaming, into this world? Does it help you drift off? Does it provide you with an enjoyable night's rest? Are your dreams filled with pleasant images at the thought of the dead being ripped from the ground and being made to do the bidding of their new masters?"

"Of course not!" Snapped the headmaster.

"If your sister was brought back, would you still sit here, doing nothing other than trying to stop the one person that could give her back the peace that she was denied?" Harry growled.

"Don't you speak of my sister." Warned Dumbledore, eyes narrowing. "How dare you even say her name. Whatever else you may say of me, I loved my sister. I would do whatever it took to keep her from being harmed."

"So you only care when it's personal!" Harry laughed. "Nice to know. When it's someone else's sister, or mother, or son, who cares. Right? But if someone attacks you or yours, you're all too willing to fight. What a disgusting individual you've become, Albus."

"That isn't what I said and you know it!"

"Harry..." Balthazar warned.

"Already?" Harry asked. "Figures... alright, old man. As much as I'd love to sit here and shoot the breeze with you, I have a job to do. Are you sure you won't give me the hourglass?"

"I would sooner die."

"Boldly stated." Harry said. Shifting out, wands began to spin into existence throughout the room, all of them turning to aim down at

Dumbledore. Their tips began to glow orange one by one, until their light made the room almost too bright to see in. Dumbledore tried to destroy the wands, but they would shift in and out to avoid being struck. Suddenly, the headmaster found himself unable to turn. Looking down, he saw four pairs of glowing arms sticking up out of the floor, holding his lower legs in place. Harry shifted back in front of him, both wands aimed for him. Pointing at a spot just under one of the headmaster's shoulders, Harry snarled, "CRUENTUS FORO!"

Thin beams of orange light shot from the wands around the room, piercing Dumbledore's body and slamming into the floor. At the same time, Harry's own wands shot a bright yellow burst of magic into and through the headmaster's upper body. Dumbledore howled in pain as the first set of attacks struck him, but was nearly brought to silence as the second hit. But the attack was over in a very short amount of time, the wands around the room fading out. And, as the headmaster fell forward, coughing up blood, Harry caught him.

Carefully setting him down, Harry cut open the front of Dumbledore's robes with one of his wands to expose the newly-made wound. A hole, the size of a baseball, was cut clear through his body. It wasn't a clean cut, either. Bones and muscles were contorted at unnatural angles, and he was bleeding profusely. Harry closed his eyes and started muttering spells in rapid succession. A strange, blue bubble appeared inside Dumbledore's body. It didn't fix the damage done, but the blood wasn't pouring out the gaping hole under his shoulder, either.

As Harry stood up, he locked eyes with Professor McGonagall. "Get him to Pomfrey, NOW! He'll live if you're quick! I'm not a bloody medic. That's the best I can do for him. I've got what I came for. He still needs to protect this school. For better or worse, he can't die. Not yet. Make sure he sees tomorrow, professor. I'll be very angry if he dies before I'm ready for him to."

McGonagall broke free of the Gryffindors she had been protecting, rushing across the room as quickly as she could move. Harry, meanwhile, was walking a few feet away, where a blood-drenched hourglass, small enough that Harry could easily palm it, was laying on the ground. Quickly banishing the gore from it, he held it up to one of

the torches on the walls to check that it was still intact. Noting that it was, Harry only gave a quick glance over his shoulder, seeing McGonagall levitating Dumbledore toward the room's exit, before letting the Armor surround him.

"You still have many lives in your care, Albus." Harry said, his voice growing fainter as he spoke. "Don't make me regret letting you survive this. Take care of these children. Because if something goes wrong, then the war will depend on you. And may whatever foul gods you believe in have mercy on your souls when that happens."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: I hate fight scenes. I hate them because I am BAD at them. I would rather describe what's going on in general during a fight than go into the specifics of them. A short, faster-paced fight scene is better than trying to drag it out. This story isn't about fighting, anyway. This story is about ending something that should have never occurred.

Remember Harry's words, boys and girls, because this will be important later on. You see, I've decided the fate of the R-Series. I'm going to be doing an eighth book, but it's going to be very, very different from what any of you might expect it to be. Pay attention to the signs, everyone. Because at one critical moment somewhere between here and the end, something very important will occur. And it's going to prove to be the key point in determining how everything else will play out.

Two chapters until the first big surprise occurs. I'll see you then.

## Chapter 13 – The Halls of Ur’terash

Harry winced as his feet hit solid ground once more. Panting, he let out an irritated groan as he slumped forward, dropping to his knees. Eyes clenching shut, Harry let himself topple over, curling up into a tight little ball. His head was throbbing, his stomach was twisting, and he wanted nothing more than to just sleep. But that wouldn't do. He couldn't rest here. He wasn't even particularly sure where 'here' was. He knew the general direction to take to return to his friends, and once he got close enough to Voldemort's camps, he could easily work out which way it was on his own. But at the moment, he didn't care about any of that.

Feeling as though his heart was trying to escape through his ribcage, Harry began to cough. A second groan escaped his lips as he opened his eyes. He was injured enough to start vomiting blood. Eyes closing again, he muttered, "The hell happened?"

Inside the clock tower, the younger form of Balthazar was sitting in a regal-looking chair, looking exhausted. Glancing up into the infinite blackness that loomed over him, he replied, "You pushed your luck too far. You could have done that without your spare wands."

"If something like that's messing me up this bad, what bloody chance do I have at successfully invoking the Susceptor?!" Harry snapped, whimpering as his head started aching more. In a softer tone, he continued, "Besides, I wanted to ensure he couldn't move. Didn't think the old bastard was still so quick."

Shaking his head, Balthazar replied, "Harry, you weren't managing your power. That's the problem here. Same reason you couldn't put a dent in Wagner. You've got access to your power, you just can't focus it well yet. Be glad you can even cast at all. The forging process would've had most wizards out of action for far longer than this. Meanwhile, you're up putting a substantial drain on your magic supply. It's a wonder your body hasn't complained like this more often. The fact that you got back to Britain in one day, fought him, then escaped still astonishes me. You should have been feeling severe fatigue about three-quarters of the way there."

"Who said I wasn't?" Harry asked.

Glaring up into nothingness, Balthazar asked, "And what did you think that would accomplish?! You're lucky Dumbledore didn't blast your fool head off!"

"Could you, y'know, not yell? My head's already pounding." Harry said, rolling over onto his back and stretching his limbs out.

"Someone has to." Balthazar said. Getting up from his chair, the ghost walked over and inspected one of the giant gears that were slowly turning along the walls. "Rest. I'll stay awake. If anything starts to get near, I'll force you awake."

"I'm not sleeping here." Harry said, scowling. "There are ants. And I want to get back to my friends."

"So cast a spell to keep the bugs away." Balthazar said, rolling his eyes. "You're not going anywhere tonight. I won't let you. I'm cutting your magic until morning."

"Oh, don't you argue with me about this, you uppity ghost." Harry growled, wishing he had someone to actually glare at. "I can make it back to them just fine!"

"Just fine?!" Repeated Balthazar, his pitch rising. "Look at you, you daft twit, you're barely able to remain out of the fetal position! You'd risk damaging your core if you tried to make the rest of the journey. Then you'd be out of action for far longer than if you were to just take the rest of the day off!"

"Go get pegged in a room, supper chunks." Harry muttered, digging his wand from his back pocket, aiming awkwardly at the ground, and casting a few simple spells. It wasn't much, but it would have to do. Letting his eyes close again, he added, "Gonna sleep. Happy?"

"Perfectly." Balthazar said, sighing as he walked back over to his chair. Throwing himself back down into it, he closed his eyes as well. "I wish I had known what I was getting myself into, fusing with you."

"I'm a handful on the best of days." Harry mumbled.

Snorting, Balthazar cracked one eye open and replied, "Handful isn't quite the word I'd use, but yes, you are. At any rate, sleep well. Don't worry, I'll wake you before noon."

"Kay."

As Harry drifted off to sleep, Balthazar let out a quiet scowl of his own. After a few moments, he pushed himself up and out of his chair again. The clock tower was nearly silent now, the only noise coming from the swirling pools of magic being held in place by the massive gears. Walking over to one of the smaller ones, the ghost reached out, brushing his hand over it. It was cold and felt rusty, though its appearance argued otherwise.

"You're running out of time, Harry..." Whispered the ghost, frowning at the hairline fracture in the gear. With a sigh, Balthazar turned and walked over to the small table in the center of the room. Sitting down at it, he leaned forward, the fingers on one hand slowly drumming. Closing his eyes, he blew out another sigh, this one harsher than the last. "You've got to hurry..."

oOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

The trip back to the camp in Germany went off without a hitch. Harry got a good, if painful, night's sleep and nothing had tried to attack him. Feeling far more energized, he had set off around noon. It wasn't until after nightfall that he arrived back at the camp. He had tried to slow down, as Balthazar had warned him of danger if he exerted himself very hard. He was, after all, still recovering from the release of the first two locks again. It was taxing on his body and mind and any slowdown he could afford, he needed to allow.

With a CRACK, he landed hard just off to the side of the fire, where his friends were enjoying their dinner. His appearance led to a few quick, surprised yelps and a few drawn wands before they noticed who it was. Standing up straight, his back to the group, Harry held up the hourglass and murmured, "Draco?"

Setting his plate to one side, Malfoy stood. "Welcome back."

"Wait, aren't you going to tell us what happened?" Asked Hermione.

Pausing only for a moment, Harry pivoted and turned to face the group. The front of his robes were still stained with Dumbledore's blood. A few drops had splattered onto his face, as well. And, concentrating as he had on getting there and back again, he hadn't bothered to clean himself up. "I blew a hole in him and got what I went there for. Do you have any follow-up questions?"

"You... blew a hole in him?" Repeated Lupin, brow creasing.

"He's alive." Harry said, turning away again as Malfoy walked over. "But only just."

Ginny shivered, glaring across the fire at Harry. "Go deliver the damn thing already. Stop being so much..."

"Like Tom?" Finished Harry, a smile rising on his face. Glancing over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed. "I'm nothing like he is."

"Aren't you? I can imagine Voldemort's using some motto like 'no matter the cost' as well." Ginny stated.

"Gin..." Hermione warned, leaning towards the redhead.

Harry pushed the hourglass against Malfoy's chest as he turned around. When the blonde grabbed it, Harry closed the distance between himself and Ginny. Kneeling next to her, he leaned in close and narrowed his eyes to slits. "If you have a problem with me, little girl, then turn and run away. I won't have weaklings blocking my way to victory. You can take Hermione with you. You both seem to take issue with how I'm running this show. Return to Albus and be thrown away like the trash you are!"

"Harry!" Tonks snapped, getting up and walking over, grabbing the back of his cloak. "That's ENOUGH."

Standing, Harry glared at Tonks and asked, "Is it? Do you think for a minute that either of them would be welcomed with open arms at Hogwarts? Not after what I've done. I asked that old fool to settle it peacefully - I asked him to be the bigger man and hand over the artifact without a fight. And in front of his staff and students, he refused! I did what I had to to advance in what needs to be done! And if I've got anyone in my group who disagrees with how I do things, then they can get the hell out of here."

"Doubt they could get back even if they wanted to." George commented, looking none too happy at how Harry had been addressing his sister.

"And leaving your protection would be dangerous." Fred added. "Going back to Dumbledore's out, so where would they go that's safe?"

"Exactly my point." Harry said, turning to face the twins. "Where would they go? Like it or not, everyone here knows this is what's best. I will rid this planet of Voldemort."

"Even at the cost of your sanity?" Asked Ginny.

Smirking, Harry looked down at the Gryffindor. "My sanity has been ebbing away for years. How would you fare in my place?"

"How I would fare in your place is beside the point." Ginny said, getting up.

Chuckling, Harry asked, "Is it? Do you think ANY of you would be able to accomplish what I have? Strong as most of you are, I doubt any of you could have even survived the forging process I underwent. If any of you had led the attack on Azkaban, no one would have returned. If any of you had faced down Riddle one on one, you would have all DIED. Yet I survived. I'm meant to do this. I don't care what anyone thinks of me, least of all you lot. Because you people are supposed to get how I think. After this long, I would have thought you'd think better of me."

"Maybe if you weren't going around acting like a colossal dick all the time, we would." Commented Ginny, smirking at Harry.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Should I put on my Sunday best and go politely ask Voldemort to stop raising the dead, then?" Asked Harry. "I'm sure he'd understand! He is such a lovely person, after all. But then, I suppose you would know as well as me, wouldn't you?!"

Ginny went to slap Harry, but he brought one of his own arms up to intercept it. Eyes narrowing again, he leaned in close and, his voice quiet, began to hiss, "I don't give a damn what you think of me, you stupid little girl, but if you don't begin to treat me with at least some semblance of respect, I'll throw you back to Riddle and he can finish what he STARTED! Look into my eyes and tell me I wouldn't! I'm sick of being treated like a petty criminal when I'm the only one who can stop him! I'm sick of being looked at like I was carrying the god damn plague! I'm sick and damn tired of knowing that if I fail, the entire planet is likely to fall under his control sooner or later! Do you have any idea the kind of stress that brings?! Can you even FATHOM that kind of weight on your shoulders?!"

Ginny flinched, unable to hold his gaze. Quietly, also in Parseltongue, she replied, "We're not your enemies."

Knocking Ginny's arm back down, Harry glared at her. "Perhaps not, but you're doing a fine job of blurring the lines. What's gotten into you?"

"You think you're the only one who's stressed?!" Asked Ginny, some of the fire slipping back into her voice. "Do you think we're just happy and fine because you're around? You're half crazed from fatigue and stress and yet we're supposed to believe you're some sort of paragon of justice? Are we to just blindly follow you to our deaths, Harry? For god's sakes, from the look and sound of it, you damn near killed Dumbledore! How are we supposed to feel at a time like this? Rejoiced that you've got your stupid little trinket to prove your worth to an equally insane lich?! Sorry Harry, that isn't how the world works and I'm sick of acting like I'm fine with everything you're doing."

Harry cast his gaze around the campfire. Eyes moving to land back on Ginny, he asked, "So leave. I can do the rest on my own. The only reason you're all along is so I could keep an eye on you."

"Which is exactly why we can't leave." Ginny said, switching back to English. "We can't leave, because then you'd get all depressed and distracted and you'd end up failing. In the end, it doesn't matter how the rest of us feel. You're dragging us with you one way or another because if we leave and you get yourself killed, we'd blame ourselves for it. And none of us would be able to live with that guilt."

"In the end," Harry murmured, "It doesn't matter. Your contributions to the end of this will most likely be next to nonexistent." Turning, Harry walked back over to Malfoy. "However, you do provide a use beyond me merely knowing where you are and whether or not you're safe."

"And what would that be?"

"You reaffirm the fact that at least a few people haven't totally given up on me." Harry said, his voice quiet. "The amount of people who believe in me probably just went down to only you lot. If you give up on me, then what do I do? Keep fighting, despite feeling as though I've failed? I don't want to do things this way, Ginny. I tried getting him to end this peacefully. I can show you the memory if you want. I'll prove here and now that I tried. But he wouldn't comply. We need Wagner's help. We can't take on Voldemort, his Death Eaters, and an unknown number of undead men and women by ourselves. I'm not that powerful."

"You took down Dumbledore." Ginny said. "I'd call that powerful."

"I'm not invincible." Harry whispered. "I barely made it away from Hogwarts. And..."

"And?"

"...He was holding back."

Ginny's brow creased. "Dumbledore?"

"Yes." Harry said, eyes opening again. "He wasn't fighting me with anywhere near the power he could have. He held back. I don't know if it was just because I locked everyone in and he didn't want to hurt them or what, but he didn't use his full power to stop me. Why? Why would he do that? In the end, Ginny, I'm far weaker than I prefer to think about. I'm not even sure that the Susceptor will be ABLE to finish Riddle off. The Gauntlet's becoming damaged, as well. At least internally. Balthazar tells me one of the gears - it's... I don't know how to explain it to you lot that would make sense. Imagine a large clock tower's innards. One of the gears inside that clock tower has a crack in it. The Gauntlet's not able to handle the amount of power I've been needing to channel through it. And even then, I have to open two of three locks, I'm limited to a very short time, and I'm thoroughly useless after. And when I fight Voldemort, I'll have to open the third lock. One minute is all I'll have. If I'm not being myself, think about how much I have to try calculating ahead of time. One single second out of line and I'll fail. And I won't get another chance. The spell will overload the wands. They'll break. I have a single shot to do this."

"So that gives you the right to act like a lunatic?" Asked Ginny.

"No. But it explains why I do sometimes." Harry said. "Balthazar's said it a few times, and I'm certain that I've told you guys before. The Gauntlet's going to drive me insane eventually. I'll probably have to cleave my right arm off at some point to save myself from that fate, so that's something else always on my mind - fighting with the potential madness from the Gauntlet. Like I said... you wouldn't be able to deal with all of this pressure. None of you would. I won't apologize for anything I say or do. That I'm even capable of rational thought anymore is a testament to my strength. And my desire to win. Whichever you'd prefer to think of. I won't have any of you end up like... like Leon... No matter how mad I'm driven by this thing, I won't hurt any of you."

"You don't know that." Luna said, her voice soft.

"Then I'll ask this of you all. If it comes to it, and the Gauntlet does drive me insane... I want you to hunt me down and kill me. If I lose all traces of sanity and it looks like I'll replace Voldemort, do everything you can to prevent it. I... know that's asking a lot of you, but..."

"Potter." Malfoy said. When Harry glanced aside, the blonde continued, "Stop. You won't go mad, you'll kill Voldemort, and all will be forgiven in time. You're doing what you have to. Stop thinking about it. I know you're a bloody Ravenclaw and you can't help but think twenty-four seven, but it isn't healthy. Hell, it's probably one of the reasons you're so stressed. It also wouldn't surprise me if being stressed would help lead you to that path of madness. So just shut your emotions off. You can still do that, can't you? Meditate for awhile. Don't think. Now come on. Wagner's waiting."

Malfoy took off towards the church. Harry watched him for a moment. "...Easy for you to say." He muttered. Then, a little louder, he added, "We'll be back soon.."

Malfoy nodded and the two started away from the camp. Harry brought a hand up to his head after they were halfway to the church. "I can't keep this up."

"You can and you will." Malfoy replied, hands in his pockets. "Because there's no one else who can. You'll get your chance to rest after he's gone. For now, we're safe. Or we will be very shortly. I know just being guests in his city won't account for much, but we'll have a little down time, surely. If nothing else, you'll have to plot out a strategy for dealing with Voldemort and his men. Take the time to try and unwind."

"I wish it were that easy." Harry said, dropping his hand and sighing. "Ever have one of those knots at the very top of the back of your neck? Up near where your spine connects to your skull? Up so high you can't pop it to either side and get rid of the pain?"

"Yeah?"

"That. That exactly. Everywhere." Harry said. "That's how I'm feeling."

"You could definitely do with a decent bit of rest. But you won't get a proper night of it until he's gone. We both know that." Malfoy said.

"Yeah. You think I've been too out of line with the girls, Draco...?"

"I think you could stand to tone it down, yes." Malfoy said. "The hell were you two arguing about, anyway?"

"My idiocy, mostly." Harry said.

Smirking, Malfoy looked over at Harry. "Ya know, Potter... you look like absolute shit."

"Oh, piss off." Harry groused.

"There's gotta be a joke in here where I compare the bags under your eyes to the Weasleys' mother, but I can't seem to find it." Malfoy said, looking put-out.

Harry snorted. "Noticing little details about me, Draco?"

"Keep down that line of questioning and I'll hex you down into Wagner's city." Malfoy said, glaring weakly at Harry.

"I'll take the express route, sure." Harry said. "Beats having to walk down those ruddy stairs. I'm too damn tired to be doing this."

"A hero's job is never done, huh?"

Harry just groaned out his reply.

oOoOoOoOo

Around an hour later, Malfoy returned to the campsite along with a man in frayed robes. His face was cloaked by a hood, but it was obvious he wasn't among the living. As they approached, Malfoy called out to those still sitting around the campfire.

"Hey! Pack the tents up, we're moving shop!"

"Down there, I presume?" Lupin said, wincing as he got to his feet. "Where's Harry?"

"Too tired to make the trip back up the stairs. Can't say as I blame him. When I left, he was chatting with Wagner about retrieving the hourglass. One of the guards took it off to the 'boys in R&D,' whatever that's supposed to mean." Malfoy explained. Then, gesturing to the hooded man beside him, he continued, "This is Theodore. He's going to escort us to where we'll be staying. Wagner assures us that no matter what we think of the rest of his city, he's fixed one corridor of rooms to be a bit more appealing to us living folk. Fragrance charms, some color, that kind of thing."

Lupin nodded. "Very well. I assume all went alright in regards to Harry's job, then?"

"They did." Replied the hooded man, his voice raspy. "Our lord was quite pleased to see that Harry Potter meant business. He has done us a great service. Nygus, our head scientist, should be able to expand his research considerably due to this. One step closer to a cure for our curse. It isn't perfect, but it's advancement."

"What he said." Malfoy stated, smirking slightly. As Luna went to round up those inside the tents, he looked aside at Theodore and asked, "I assume Wagner knew that Harry would succeed if he had those rooms ready?"

A gravelly chuckle filled the air as Theodore replied, "Indeed he did. Our lord can sense these things. After speaking with Potter, he knew. You have arrived at an excellent time. Many of our guards have been attacked as of late. Voldemort's forces, of course. They haven't yet tried an assault on Ur'terash, but it is only a matter of time. He is... testing the waters, as the saying goes. He wants to see if our lord will come out."

"And he hasn't?" Asked Lupin, walking over as the twins shrunk down the tents and began to put out the fire. "Why not? Surely he's got the power to defeat Voldemort on his own. If what we were told was true, Harry wasn't able to do anything to him. So why does he not go out?"

"As strong as our lord is, his power wanes the further he gets from Ur'terash. His essence is so imbued throughout the city, it has almost become like a second phylactery to him. But there is more to it than

that. Understand, we are not fighters. All of the guards to our great city are volunteers. Most within its walls are merely lost souls, waiting to be freed. Our lord is the sole exception to this. He has great power, so he must use it to ensure our safety. He granted us sanctuary when the outside world would seek to destroy our very souls. He feels it is his duty to make sure that each and every one of us is holding up as well as we can, given the dire circumstances. He is a great man, but his burden is also such." Theodore explained slowly.

"How will your city provide us help for stopping Voldemort if there are no properly trained fighters?" Lupin asked.

"All of us have felt Voldemort's evil magics tainting the land around us. He is creating utter abominations; raising souls only to cast them aside or let them loose in the countryside. He has not quite perfected his dark art. We are all aware of how in danger of attack we are. We all want to give something back to the man who rescued us. He offered us a home and we aim to defend it at all costs. Voldemort doesn't have the sheer force of numbers yet. We do. If he comes at us a hundred strong, we shall rally a thousand." Theodore said, a grin barely visible beneath the hood. "Now then... are you all ready? Follow me. I shall lead you back to the city."

"Hope none of you get dizzy or tired too easily. There isn't any way to get around the blackness on the stairs unless Wagner himself comes to greet us. And I'm sure he's still talking with Potter." Malfoy added as the group turned and headed back toward the church.

"What's it like down there?" Asked Luna.

"Picture Hogwarts' corridors, only devoid of any charm. No offense." Malfoy said.

"None taken." Theodore replied. "We have little need for decoration. All of our focus is on keeping Ur'terash safe and finding a cure to our unlife. It was not meant to be seen by those still capable of feeling warmth. But again, our lord has seen to it that your rooms are a bit more to your liking."

Malfoy stretched as the group got closer. "Next time we leave, I'm taking a different route. I'm getting tired of traipsing up and down these blasted stairs..."

"Aww, poor widdle Draco..." Pansy cooed, stepping up beside him and poking the side of his ribs, causing his to make a highly undignified squawking noise. "Izzums widdle legs tiwed?"

"Quiet, you." Malfoy sneered.

"Or you'll do what?" Pansy asked, grinning sweetly.

"Or I'll ask Wagner to read you a bedtime story." Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. "I don't know! I'm tired, dammit. We'll see how well you're doing by the time we get to our quarters..."

They were led into the church and down the seemingly infinite winding staircase. The trip took longer than Malfoy had assumed since they were moving slower so no one lost their footing. He smirked as they got near the bottom, as Pansy had indeed started to wonder aloud just how long the stairs went on for. But they eventually hit the bottom and Theodore opened the doors leading into the hallway. Slowly, light began to return, with most of the group wincing after having been in the darkness for so long.

The city looked quite similar to Hogwarts in regard to its style. It looked to be built from large stones and had a very ancient feel to it. Torches lined the walls, though most of the city's residents had little need for them. It was one small comfort so that they could at least try to pretend they could feel the warmth. The corridors seemed to go on forever, with the group passing through what seemed to be a prison before heading up a few flights of stairs. Things got no lighter as they ascended, though the chilled atmosphere of the prison wing faded. The prison hadn't been empty. The cries of those kept inside echoed within the narrow hallway; pleas of those caught too close to Ur'terash's entrances.

As they walked, they finally started hearing talking again. They were getting closer to the throne room now. Harry's voice could be heard from a good distance away.

--can't we attack them here, coming down from the mountains? We'd have the high ground advantage, wouldn't we?"

"Yes," Replied Wagner. "But they could very easily cause a small avalanche."

"But that would destroy their camp as well..." Harry argued.

"Indeed it would. But they would rebuild elsewhere. It wouldn't be the first time they've used such reckless tactics to preserve themselves and their master's experiments." Wagner said.

The group reached a giant archway leading into the throne room, where Harry and Wagner were standing near a large map spread out on a table. It showed the local geography and had markers where Voldemort's forces were in relation to their own. When Harry had first seen the map, a wash of terror had gone through him. There was a Death Eater camp less than half a mile from the point they had been camping. One that seemed to be expanding quite rapidly, judging from reports. Along with Harry and Wagner were two large men, a pair of guard captains to the two largest squads Ur'terash had. They were filling Harry in on Voldemort's seemingly self-destructive movements.

"When he first came here," Said one of the men, "He and his forces spread out. He set down a base camp here..." He pointed to a spot on the map, then moved his bony finger a short distance away. "And over here is where his first real base of operations was. His top Death Eaters were working around the clock to reviving the dead with their memories and souls intact."

"He failed." Said the other man. "Bringing the soul back requires a strong understanding of necromancy. His Death Eaters were only given the basic guidelines for resurrecting someone. They were churning out mindless ghouls capable of doing little more than killing. Their souls had been shredded in the return, rendering them insane."

"Sounds like the kind that were led into Dumbledore's headquarters." Harry said. "I fought a group like that. Seemed they wanted to turn on

the Death Eaters leading them around as much as they wanted to come at me."

"He was field testing them." Wagner stated. "His men have no way of knowing how well they've done until the victim opens its eyes. You ask it a question and if it responds, it's retained most of its sanity. Enough to survive and function, anyway. If it starts screaming and thrashing around, it's little more than a mindless wretch that deserves to be put out of its misery."

"I thought you could ease them." Harry said.

"I am not a miracle worker, Harry." Wagner said, shaking his head sadly. "My power is finite as much as yours is. I can repair souls to a point. I can help calm the undead, but the conditions have to be perfect. The soul needs to be intact and the person's own willpower has to be strong. I've brought countless back from the edge of madness this way. Sometimes a victim of necromancy will wake up and begin screaming just because it understands its situation. Forcefully removed from whatever afterlife exists and stuffed back into their rotting shells can tear weaker minds apart."

"Sir." Theodore said, walking over. "I have retrieved our guests."

Wagner turned around. "Ah, very good. Thank you. Harry can escort them from here."

"Then I'll return to watching the eastern gate." Theodore said, bowing slightly before turning and shambling away.

"Welcome." Wagner said, inclining his head toward Malfoy and the group behind him. "I presume you have been informed of what's to happen?"

"We have." Lupin said, stepping forward. "Thank you for the hospitality."

"Think nothing of it." Wagner replied. "It is, after all, the least I can do. It's dangerous out there. We're lucky the Death Eaters near your camp weren't alerted to your presence."

"There were Death Eaters near us?" Ginny asked.

"Come have a look." Harry said, gesturing at the map. "Look - here's where we were, and here's where they are. They must have been too busy to notice us. That or they assumed it was Wagner's men."

"So what's the situation look like, Harry?" Lupin asked. "What kind of forces are we staring down?"

"He's got nearly two dozen camps of varying sizes throughout the area, including his own. A team of Death Eaters remains in each camp while a smaller group goes out body snatching. The rituals are performed and more undead are created. Strangely, it seems Tom's not left his own camp since arriving..." Harry said. "In fact, no one's seen him since he arrived. Best they can tell, he's remained holed up in his tent."

"The undead can... smell death, so to speak," Wagner continued. "And the stench coming from that tent is almost overpowering."

"Meaning what?" Asked Ginny.

"Meaning he's dying. Or his body is, anyway. I dunno if the bastard will ever truly die." Harry said, shaking his head slowly.

"If he's dying, why can't we just wait it out?" Tonks asked, her brow creased.

"Isn't it obvious?" Hermione said. "He's apparently dying, he's experimenting with the undead... it sounds to me like he wants to become a lich."

"That's our fear." Wagner stated. "Voldemort's power is nothing to take lightly, even when he's weakened. If he unlocks the correct way to resurrect himself as a lich and his followers can perform it correctly, his power will only grow. Of course, this is all merely speculation based off what we can sense. But it is an odd set of circumstances."

"If he succeeds, he'll probably send a Death Eater to hide the phylactery in some godforsaken spot deep within the Earth. We'd never be able to kill him." Harry said. "I don't want to even begin to imagine that. No matter how many times we'd strike him down, he would eventually rise again."

"So what do we do?" Luna asked.

"We plan. And we do it fast." Wagner said. "With so many of his forces so near my city, I must remain as close to it as possible. My men are not born fighters and though their willpower may be strong, I fear their bodies are not. Voldemort's men will know how to strike down the undead."

"Pardon my ignorance," Pansy began. "But isn't that what you're after? Returning to the grave?"

"Yes. But therein lies the problem. There are many ways to kill the undead. Those, however, do not involve saving the soul. If the soul is destroyed, there is no peace."

"Yeah, but..."

"Understand, young lady... all of us want to move on. None of us want to simply... cease to be. There is no greater fear than to simply be wiped from existence without a trace. We wish to return to that which we've been so wrongly denied." Wagner explained. "We are not ghouls. We are not emotionless husks. We are victims. People raised by those who'd use us to do their bidding. I've rescued many. But there are many others I'm incapable of reaching. Either due to distance or poor resurrection techniques. I try to offer the ones that are capable of coherent thought a sanctuary from the outside world. We defend it at all cost. But there is only so much we can do. Voldemort is out there bringing more and more tortured souls back to this plane of existence and they are suffering. They are suffering and there is nothing I can do from here."

"The basic plan will be simple." Harry murmured, glancing toward Wagner as the lich turned to compose himself. "We're going to slaughter the Death Eaters. And we're going to liberate those brought

back by them. We'll bring the undead back here. Wagner will heal as many as he can..."

"What about those he can't?" Asked Lupin.

"I'll destroy them." Wagner said, his voice bitter.

"But... won't that mean...?" Began Hermione.

"It will. But it is preferable to an endless unlife of suffering." Wagner said. Pausing, the lich shook his head before turning to face Harry again. "You all need rest. Your quarters are ready."

"I'd prefer to stay and plan." Harry said.

"There will be time enough for that tomorrow. We cannot move hastily. His men are thick in this region. We need to move under the cover of darkness. Rest for tonight, Harry. Tomorrow night, we will begin to purge my lands of Voldemort's tainted magics."

Harry looked conflicted for a minute before nodding. "I guess. I just want to get this over with. I've been through a lot lately. After he's gone..."

"After he's gone, we will all get a chance to rest again." Wagner stated. "My people are tormented enough without him causing additional suffering. While we may not return to the safety and peace of death, we will be able to live without fear of invasion. Go, Harry. Take your friends and relax. If our fight proved anything, it proved that you need to unwind. You may not wish to hear that, but it remains true nonetheless. You'll think far more clearly when you've gotten a proper night's sleep."

Harry nodded again. "Yeah, I know." He looked over at his friends. "I know where we'll be staying. You lot ready?"

"Whenever you are, Harry." Lupin said.

"After you eat tomorrow, we will discuss our plans." Wagner said. "I will keep my men watching his. Voldemort isn't able to do anything without my knowing of it."

"Shame we don't know why he's keeping himself hidden, huh?" Harry said.

"Indeed. A shame and quite worrisome. He should have all the power he needs to do things himself. Knowing what little I do of him, he doesn't seem the type to take well to failures or setbacks. It is, then, quite strange that he is allowing all of this to go on. Something's not right about the whole situation, Harry. The sooner we figure it out, the better." Wagner said.

"Too many missing pieces to the puzzle." Harry agreed. "Right, I'll get this lot off to their rooms and we'll get settled in. I'll try not to think about things too much, though I'll promise nothing."

Harry motioned for his friends to follow him. Leaving the throne room, they made their way through a series of dreary corridors before turning into one that was a bit more lively. There were paintings hanging on the walls, pictures of nondescript landscapes. The corridor was a dead end and had five doors on either side of it. Turning, Harry gestured down the hall.

"Here we are. Pick your poison, kids. We're gonna be here for awhile."

"At least we won't be all cramped together anymore." Ginny said. "No offense, girls, but a little space now and again isn't bad."

"So now what?" Asked Fred. "We just wait?"

"Yeah." Harry replied. "Like he said, we'll rest up, try to eat something - god only knows what we're gonna eat here - and spend tomorrow planning. Tomorrow night, we mobilize. It's taken a good while, but we're finally going to start fighting back. Rest while you can, because I have a feeling we won't get that luxury after tomorrow."

"Who's gonna use the extra two rooms?" Asked Malfoy.

"Two?" Pansy said.

"I assume Potter and Tonks are staying together. I also assume the twins will be." Malfoy said, shrugging.

"Eh, I might turn one into a little training room if I need to vent or something." Harry said. "Okay, enough damn talking. Into your rooms, you bloody hyenas!"

"Call me a hyena again and I'll hex your mouth off." Pansy said, cocking an eyebrow.

Harry stuck out his tongue at the girl, causing her to snort.

"Real mature, Potter." Said the Slytherin. "Fine, fine, we'll get going. You two better not keep us up all night!"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Tonks said, her tone dry. "No sneaking into Malfoy's room. Again."

Smirking as Pansy blushed suddenly, Tonks turned and dragged Harry into the first bedroom on the left. From outside, they heard Pansy mumbling darkly to herself as the sounds of the group splitting apart happened. Doors opened and shut and, eventually, there was relative silence. The rooms were small, but well made. Each had a bed that could easily fit three people, the floors had beautiful rugs on them, and the walls had paintings hung on them like those found in the hall. Candles were strewn about the place, keeping it well lit. There was another door on the far side of the room, leading to a small bathroom.

Walking over to the bed, Harry turned and looked as though he was going to flop back on it, but Tonks drew her wand and froze him in place before he could.

"Not so fast, you." She said, walking over. "You're not getting this bed filthy. Go shower, damn it."

With a flick of her wrist, Harry was free again. Scowling at the girl, he trudged off toward the bathroom, looking down at himself. "Could just banish it, ya know..."

"You smell like you've been sleeping on the ground." Tonks stated, sitting on the edge of the bed and removing her shoes. "Hey, who the hell had our tents? Oh crap, Fred and George do, I think. I'm gonna go get them back before they remember and start rifling through our things to compare underwear or whatever they do for fun."

Harry cast Tonks a weird glance over his shoulder. "Compare underwear?"

"A girl has to have a few secrets, you know." Tonks declared, putting her shoes back on and rushing over to the door. "The last thing us girls need on this trip is for those two to start asking which pair of panties we're wearing at any given time..."

"Bet if they tried that with Ginny, they'd join Wagner's men." Harry commented. "Go on, get our clothes and stuff. I'll try not to be too long."

"By all means, don't rush for my sake. I'd prefer you to smell nice and clean again. Forget about being quick, just concentrate on being thorough." Tonks ordered, opening the door and slipping out.

"Yeah, yeah..." Harry muttered, tugging his robe off. Holding it up, he started casting spells on it to get the blood and dirt out of it. He had just closed the door behind him when he heard a commotion from the hall. Briefly, he pondered whether the twins had been caught in the act or not. He decided, as he turned on the shower and adjusted the water, that he would be far happier not knowing what was going on out there.

Besides, he reasoned, he was going to hear all about it from Tonks the second he left the bathroom. The tale of the twin panty-raiding idiots would just have to wait until then.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: A bit longer than normal, but I had a lot I needed to fit in. Next chapter's a bit plot chapter, kids, and one I've been wanting to get to since I got the full chapter guide written out. I won't even hint at what begins aside from the fact that Harry's group does, in fact, begin assaulting the necromancer camps around Ur'terash!

And, off the top of my head, I think 15 will be a bit of fluff. That's it. Just one big pile of fluff. There's probably not going to be too much plot-centric stuff going on there. So those of you who hate that stuff can probably feel safe in skipping it. Just don't skip 14. If you do, you'll be left wondering just what the hell I did.

I'm sure people will wonder that anyway, though.

Post upload note: Happy Whatever, everyone. Sorry I didn't get up through 14 uploaded by the 25th like I said I would. I'll have 14 up soon. Got it sitting uploaded as I type this. And it's a fair bit shorter than the average chapter these days, so it won't take long to edit once I do get around to it. In any case, it should be up before 2009 rolls in!

## Chapter 14 – Reunion

"It doesn't have to be this way." Malfoy stated.

"Yes, Draco. It does." Harry replied, his voice quiet.

Narrowing his eyes, Malfoy crossed the courtyard, wands drawn.  
"You seem awfully calm, given I'm about to kill you."

"You're about to try." Harry corrected.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Smirking, Harry opened his eyes again. "You think Leon's wand is going to seriously work against me? Sparring is one thing. Outright killing, however, should prove quite difficult."

"So what you're saying is this is getting back to basics." Malfoy said, holding up Solieu's wand for a moment before grinning feral and stuffing it back into its holster. "One on one, just like the good old days, Potter?"

"Something like that." Harry said.

"I'd ask you to go easy on me, but I think you're the one at the disadvantage this time." Malfoy purred, aiming his own wand Harry's way.

"Thinking like that will get you killed." Harry said, raising his wand as well. "Well then, Draco - one final time? At the end of the world?"

"The world will continue, Potter. It will be without you, but it will continue." Malfoy said.

"How can you be so sure?" Harry asked, a psychotic look rising in his eyes.

"Because no matter how many times you tell it to yourself, you're nothing special. Screwed over from the start, certainly. But not special. Look at what you've become." Malfoy said. "Look at what

you've made. Is this what you saw for yourself? Is this where you really wanted to be?"

"I can't protect them unless they follow my orders." Harry said, eyebrows raised, a grin slowly forming. "I wish you could see that."

"All I see is a broken wizard." Malfoy spat. "I'm sorry it's come to this, Potter. I never thought, after all we'd been through, that I would be the one to finish you."

"You assume too much, Draco." Harry said, a glow to his eyes. "You say you're sorry... but not as sorry as I'll be. I merely wanted to keep everyone safe. Is that so wrong? I'll be a sport about it. I'll let you leave as long as you stand down now. Don't let your last moments be spent staring at the fools you've brought along to witness your slaughter!"

"It won't be my slaughter they see. Goodbye, Harry."

"...Goodbye, Draco."

There was a flash as the two wizards rushed at one another, wands pulling back and shooting forward, a pair of blinding spells connecting with one another. The dream hadn't been enough to shake Harry awake, but the impact and flash had been. Jerking bolt upright in bed, he found himself breathing heavily and sopping wet. He had clearly been tossing quite a bit. Glancing down, he wondered how Tonks hadn't been awakened by it. Blowing out a low sigh after catching his breath, Harry slipped out of bed. He needed to mop the sweat off of his face.

"Nightmare?" Asked Balthazar, his gemstone glowing enough to help Harry find his way over to the small, wooden dresser that was near the bed.

"You could say that." Whispered Harry, fishing around for a towel. When he grabbed hold of one, he began to wipe his forehead and cheeks. "Dunno what it could mean, though."

"Dreams rarely mean anything." Said the ghost.

"Maybe yours don't. I've had dreams of stuff that came back to haunt me later on before." Harry murmured, turning and leaning back against the dresser, the towel still clutched tightly in one hand.

"What was it about?"

Harry let his eyes unfocus as he looked up at the ceiling. "Draco and I were fighting. I dunno where it was. Everything but the two of us was pretty blurry. Lotta black scenery, though... I'm not sure. It was clearly in a field or something. There were other people around. But again, I couldn't make them out very well. We were talking like we were going to literally kill each other right then and there..."

Balthazar was silent for a long time before replying, "I'm sorry. I believe the Gauntlet might be causing these nightmares. The fracture in the gear has grown longer. Not much, understand. You are still in no immediate danger. However..."

"...If it keeps up, I'll go mad. Yeah." Harry breathed, closing his eyes.

"I should have told you prior to the forging." Balthazar said, his voice gentle. "I am quite sorry. But... I was very weak, Harry. Though being rescued did help restore a bit of that energy, I was focused almost solely on bringing the Gauntlet back together. You would be amazed how much you selectively forget after a few centuries..."

"I won't hold you responsible." Harry said, shaking his head. "I just worry. It's good that we'll be mobilizing today, but... the thought of going insane is always there, in the back of my head. It'll be like what happened after Sirius died, only worse. I don't want to be like that again, Balthazar. I don't want to feel so out of control and disconnected from reality."

"An understandable worry, given your situation. I am doing everything in my power to keep the damage from spreading. It isn't being caused by magic usage, if you were worried about that. It seems to be spreading based solely on time. I can try to prevent any further cracking, but I'm not sure I can do anything."

"It's like a bomb. Only trouble is, I can't see how much time is left. I need to defuse the current situation as quickly as I can, but the nagging worry will always be there." Harry murmured.

"I have been thinking of ways to safe both yourself and your arm. However..."

"Yeah. The Gauntlet's fused with my arm now. It would take a huge magical surge or something to reverse the process. I dunno what could cause that." Harry said. "More power than I can generate on my own, I'm sure. Shame my light clones don't share my power, huh?"

"Indeed." Balthazar stated. "Are you going to try sleeping some more?"

"I think I'd rather go for a walk. I need to clear my head; focus on something." Harry said, pushing himself away from the dresser so that he could get some clothes from it. While changing, he asked, "Do you think if all my friends somehow let me tap into their magic...?"

"It would be too dangerous. If something went wrong, the surge could shatter their magical cores. I'm sure that's a risk you aren't willing to take." Balthazar said, his voice apologetic. "I dislike saying it, but..."

"I need to think about the possibility that I'd need to lob my own arm off to remain sane." Harry finished. "Trust me. I think about it. I think about it more than is probably healthy, in fact. I don't like the thought of being one-armed. I happen to enjoy having two hands and arms. But if the choice is one-armed life or going completely insane, I'll just have to adjust."

As Harry made his way across the room, shoes in hand, he glanced over his shoulder. Tonks had rolled onto her side and was now cuddling a pillow. "...Poor Nym. She must be more exhausted than she lets on."

"She wakes up often at night." Balthazar said. "She usually drifts back off quickly. However, she has been up for many hours at times. Watching you. Ensuring you're not having nightmares, I would assume."

Cracking open the door and slipping out into the hallway, Harry sighed. "She doesn't need to do that. I'm not that far gone. The nightmares don't come as frequently as they once did." Slipping his shoes on and closing the door gently behind himself, he continued, "I'll have to talk to her next time we get some alone time. Tell her to stop sacrificing sleep on my behalf."

"Do you think she'll listen?"

"No. But it never hurts to ask."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

The plan they decided on was simple. Two separate teams would be sent out to two separate camps - the two nearest Ur'terash - and would decimate anything they found. Death Eaters were to be killed on sight and the undead were to be treated on a per-person basis. If they were screaming wretches, the guard captains would deal with them. If they could speak and still had some semblance of sanity remaining, they were to be brought back to the city, where Wagner would personally oversee their reclamation.

Harry, Tonks, Ginny, the twins, and two guard captains were on one team. Lupin and the others went with two other guard captains. Lupin's group would be handling the camp nearest Harry's former camp site. Harry's would be dealing with one that Wagner had claimed a lot of noise had been coming from. Harry wasn't entirely sure what that meant, nor was he sure he really wanted to know.

But it was progression. It was finally taking the fight to Voldemort. If he wasn't already aware, the Dark Lord would soon know of Harry's presence in the woods. It was almost midnight when the teams mobilized. The guard captains led Harry's group toward the Death Eater encampment, located barely half a mile from the nearest entrance to Ur'terash. They had stopped a good distance away, as one of the guards had stated that all of the camps had wards around them to warn of intruders. But they were still capable of seeing and hearing everything going on within. Even from a distance, Harry was able to hear it.

Screaming was filling the air. Frenzied screaming, as though someone was being tortured within an inch of his life. It was definitely a man's voice, though something was distorted about it. It was like the faint distortion every single undead person Harry had met had. Wagner had said it was something to do with magically fixing rotted organs and how they were forcefully brought back. Every aspect of the resurrection seemed to be aimed at causing the victim as much pain and torment as possible.

"The screaming started eight days ago." Murmured one of the guard captains, a stocky man named Jeremiah Rhodes. "It hasn't stopped since."

"What do you mean?" Asked Ginny.

"No need to breathe." Growled the other guard captain. He gave his name simply as 'Irons' and didn't exactly seem to be sociable.

"We haven't been able to break through and get to whoever's making the noise." Rhodes explained. "Our forces are stretched too thin. Been a bit of a mystery around the city. None of us like any of the possibilities, though."

"How many Death Eaters?" Harry asked.

"About a dozen." Irons said. "But they're tough. Sent a squad out here one time and one time alone. No one made it back."

"Anyone you want in particular?" Asked Harry, grinning aside at the gruff guard.

"Line 'em up and I'll gladly rip all of them apart." Snarled Irons.

"Any info on what kind of wards are covering the place?" Asked Tonks.

"You can't apparate in, they know when you breach them, and they sound an alert. Every other camp in the area will know we're here once we trip them." Rhodes said.

"Then we have to be quick." Fred said.

"We can do quick." George added.

"Everyone pick a partner and let's take them down as quickly as possible, then." Harry said, drawing his wands. "No stuns - shoot to kill. The fewer Death Eaters, the fewer corpses they can bring back."

It was hard to focus on their task, however, with the violent screams coming from the camp. It consisted mostly of tents, though this particular camp had been set up within a graveyard. At its center was a stone mausoleum. Two Death Eaters stood guard near the door into it. None of the black-clad men wandering the camp looked bothered by the incessant cries. Most likely, they had used some kind of spell to block it out.

As they slowly moved around the perimeter, Rhodes told Harry something that disturbed him greatly. Apparently not all the corpses in the multitude of graveyards in the area were good enough to use. Death Eaters came and went daily, bringing scores of coffins with them. When Harry asked where they were getting them from, Rhodes shrugged and said he wasn't sure. It was possible they were getting them from anywhere in that part of the world. Making matters stranger was the fact that they knew no one had been raised on-site yet. Whoever was in that mausoleum had been imported from parts unknown.

"I can't imagine anything worse." Tonks whispered as she and Harry got into position on one side of the camp. "Being unearthed, brought to a strange land, and being forced back into your dead body..."

"I can think of worse." Harry murmured, the grip on his wands tightening. "Going through that and then being forced to work for Riddle."

The guard captains would be the first to rush in, with the twins and Ginny attacking from yet another vantage point. Until then, Harry and Tonks were to wait and observe. After ten minutes in their current position, the door to the mausoleum opened. They weren't in a

position to see into it, though the Death Eater coming out was quick to slam the door behind him. He had his mask off, and his face looked bruised and bloodied. His robes were slashed and torn in places and it looked as though some of those slashes had caused him to bleed.

"Well?" Asked one of the Death Eaters guarding the door. "Did he talk?"

"Did he sound like he was fucking talking?!" Snapped the bloodied Death Eater.

"No, though I heard you saying a few choice words." Chuckled the other guard.

"Laugh it up, assholes. You're next on the list." Muttered the one who had been inside. "I dunno what the hell Jameson did with this one, but I hope he doesn't do it again. Never seen one of those things be so damn strong so soon after being raised..."

"We dealt with a few, back when we first got here." Said the guard on the left. "Took forever to put them down. Wonder if we can tame this guy. He'd be a one man wrecking crew. Hell, I bet he could tear through the soldiers at the Lich King's city, no problem."

"All I know is, I'm not going the hell back in there with that thing." Said the injured Death Eater, pausing to spit blood to one side. "I'm not getting ripped up just because the Dark Lord wants him 'fixed' or whatever he said."

"Best not to get on his bad side." Commented a guard. "Especially not now."

"Then let him go and tame the damn freak." Growled the Death Eater, wandering away from the other two. "I'm d--"

A shrill siren-like noise suddenly filled the air, causing all three men to freeze and start looking around. From the other side of the camp, someone shouted, "They're back!"

Just then, an explosion rocked another part of the camp. Harry saw two Death Eaters flying through the air, screaming as their robes burned. They landed near the three at the mausoleum, crying out in pain as they slammed into the ground. All three Death Eaters standing immediately aimed their wands and began to shoot the two that were burning with water spells, though they did little to quell the flames.

"What the hell'd they get hit with?!" Shouted the injured one.

"Who cares? Leave them! Protect the screamer!" Yelled another.

They pushed themselves away from the building, scanning the trees around them. Harry and Tonks had to stand stock still behind the tree they had been watching from, hoping they were at the right angle to not be seen.

"This would be so much easier if they hadn't busted the currents." Harry hissed. "Voldemort really didn't want me to be sneaking into his little camps..."

"SHH!"

After awhile, one of the Death Eaters yelled, "Look, over there!"

"Damn it, STOP THEM!"

Harry chanced a peek from around the tree and, seeing that the Death Eaters' backs were turned, took the opportunity to rush out and begin casting. The three fell before they knew who it was that was firing on them.

"C'mon, up to the building!" Harry called. Tonks rounded the side of the tree and joined Harry up against the mausoleum. From the sound of it, the other two groups were having no problem at all dealing with the other Death Eaters, most of which seemed to be sleeping. Around the same time, off in the distance, another siren began to wail.

"Looks like Moony's decided to have some fun, too." Harry commented. "Nym, watch for any Death Eaters. I'm gonna see what

the hell's in this place. Maybe I can shut it up. Between it yelling and the sirens going off, my head's pounding!"

"Good idea." Tonks said, taking up position near the edge of the building. Peeking out, she saw both of the other groups quickly tearing through the remaining Death Eaters. As Harry opened the door, she let out a laugh. "Yeah, I don't think I need to guard anything. These Death Eaters are terrible at combat... must have been used for their necromantic skills alone or something. Hey, Harry, who's inside?"

When no reply came, she asked again. "Harry?"

When still no reply came, she whirled around. Harry was standing there, in front of the open doorway, absolutely motionless. His wands had slipped from his hands and his eyes were as wide as Tonks had ever seen them. His mouth was trying to work, though no sound was coming out.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Asked Tonks, stepping over and grabbing his by the shoulders. "...Harry? HARRY! Look at me!"

But Harry didn't. His eyes were focused on one thing - the creature in the room. It was shackled to the back wall by its wrists and ankles. There was blood all over it. Whether it was its own or from the Death Eaters that were constantly sent in to try and calm it was unknown. But it wasn't taking to its imprisonment lightly. It thrashed against its bonds, snarling and screaming almost nonstop, desperately trying to break free.

Minutes later, the two other groups had finished with the Death Eaters and had come to see what the hold-up was. There were other Death Eaters almost assuredly inbound. They needed to get out of there quickly. They found both Harry and Tonks staring into the room, Tonks with tears streaming down her face.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Ginny asked, running over.

Tonks simply lifted a shaking hand and pointed inside. Ginny moved in closer, as did the others, and peered into the room.

"Oh god..." Breathed Ginny. "...What do we do with it...? Harry?"

Sucking in a slow, shaky breath, Harry whispered, "...I don't know."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Unfortunately, we had more trouble than we thought we would." Lupin said, sighing as he ran a hand back through his hair. "We had to deal with far more ravenous ghouls than I would've preferred."

"They had the damn things guarding the place in addition to the wards." Malfoy explained, shaking his head. "Thankfully, the idiots put them outside the wards so we could pick them off one by one. Didn't lend itself well to recovery, I'm afraid."

"Unfortunate." Wagner said, bowing his head. "At the very least, however, his forces have been slightly diminished. It's not much, but it will add up over time. We will not let up. We won't attack at the same time. We'll leave them paranoid and guessing. They won't be able to fight at full if they're sleep deprived and nervous."

"Any word on Harry's group?" Asked Pansy.

"None so far." Wagner said. "Though they should have returned long ago."

"You don't think anything's happened, do you?" Hermione asked, biting at her lower lip.

"Potter wouldn't go quietly." Malfoy stated. "If anything tried bringing him down, we would have felt the explosions."

It had been almost half an hour since Lupin's team had returned to Ur'terash, weary but victorious. None of the corpses that had been raised had been in any condition to be saved, however. The guards were left to the grim task of destroying every single undead creature they had run across. When they returned to the city, they had expected Harry's team to be there, waiting. The siren at the other

camp had sounded long before they breached their own camp, so it was a mystery as to why they were still gone.

Eventually, Wagner had sent a guard out to find them. That guard now came busting back into the room, yelling about how he had news. "Sir! They're back!"

"Why were they delayed?" Asked Wagner, walking over.

"There were... complications, sir." Said the guard, looking over his shoulder at the doorway.

Harry staggered into the room, his eyes unfocused and downcast. He had gone ahead of the others, returning with the guard. Glancing up, he looked to each of his friends and, his voice perfectly toneless, said, "Go back to your rooms. Now."

"What? Potter, we're not going anywhere." Malfoy said, walking over. "What the hell took you so long? What 'complications'?"

Harry stepped forward, grabbed the front of Malfoy's robes, and jerked him closer. "Go back to your damned rooms! All of you, right now!"

Malfoy knocked Harry's hand away from his clothing and shoved him back. "Not until you tell us what the hell's gotten into you! Was Tonks hurt? One of the others? What the hell's wrong, Potter?!"

"...I was trying to spare you from seeing it." Harry muttered, putting a hand up to his head and walking off across the room. "I tried. Don't any of you try telling me I didn't..."

Struggled cries filled the corridor that Harry had entered from. It was clear that his group was on their way in with the captured creature. The guard who had been sent out to find them suddenly remembered what he had planned on saying. "Sir! They managed to bring the screaming one in! He... is in bad shape, sir. He's the reason they took so long. They've been fighting him the whole way."

"Is he not shackled?" Asked Wagner.

"He is. But it isn't helping much." The guard said. "It's... do you recall how badly Englemore was? It's worse than that."

Wagner narrowed his eyes, striding over toward the door as the group brought the struggling creature in. They were floating it in the air, where it was twisting and screaming despite the covering that had been placed over its mouth. Its hair, half gone, was covering most of its face by the time it was lowered to the ground in front of Wagner. Malfoy narrowed his eyes, squinting at the creature before letting out a yell of his own.

"Draco?" Pansy said, walking over. "What's wrong?"

"It..." Malfoy began, brow creased. "I... Potter, how?!"

"I don't know." Harry said, his voice barely audible over the creature's screams.

Wagner knelt in front of the still-thrashing creature, reaching out and putting his hand on its chest. Almost immediately, the creature fell silent and stopped flailing about. Reaching out with his other hand, Wagner removed the device covering the undead creature's mouth, then began to undo the restraints keeping it bound up. "You are safe now." He said, his voice soothing. "You are in no danger anymore. Here, you are among friends. We know the pain you have gone through, as we have gone through it ourselves. Your willpower is clearly strong, to struggle as much as you have. But you don't have the need for that now. Focus. Focus on me and return. Look around and take in this city. Here, you will find sanctuary. Here, you will be with others who are angry and filled with the same hatred you are no doubt filled with. You will not be harmed, nor will you be commanded to harm anyone else."

Putting an arm behind the creature's head, Wagner helped it sit up. Its eyes, sunken and glowing faintly, began to focus. It looked from one person in the room to the next, not really taking in anything clearly. As its eyes darted from person to person, Wagner spoke near its ear. "Focus. Focus on us. Focus on the people around you. We

are friends. We will find a way to reverse this process you have undergone."

There was a strange, strangled noise coming from across the room. Harry's hands clenched into fists, squeezing so hard that his fingernails began to draw blood. The creature opened its mouth again and, after a few ragged, rattling groans, managed to say the first coherent thing it had all night.

"...Lu... na..."

Luna broke away from her group, running across the room. She fell to the creature's side, throwing her arms around it and jerking it out of Wagner's grasp and into her own. Sobs wracked her small frame as she clutched at the creature's fraying, tattered clothing. "What have they done to you, Solieu?"

Solieyu Reinhart, looking barely recognizable, turned his head to look up at the crying girl. He looked as though he wanted to say something else, but never got the chance. Wagner put a hand on his back and suddenly, he went limp.

"He is resting." Wagner said immediately. "When he wakes, we will begin the process of returning him as best we can. There is no guarantee. But if he has held on this long, the possibility is high that we'll succeed. If I may ask, young lady... how do you know this one?"

Still clutching at Solieu's body tightly, Luna's words were broken by her sobs. "We... were going to... going to get married..."

Wagner's eyes closed for a moment. Putting a hand on Luna's shoulder, he murmured softly, "I promise you, will we do everything in our power to ensure he can think clearly once more. I know it is little consolation, but it is the best I can give you. Please... I must get him to our medical facility as soon as I can. The sooner we begin to work, the quicker his functionality will be regained."

Harry turned and walked over as Wagner gently removed Solieu from Luna's arms. Dropping to his knees next to the girl, he reached out, stopping just shy of actually touching her back. "I didn't want to

leave him out there. Even... if we can't do anything to save him... I wanted him to be with friends. Even if he didn't know who we were..."

Luna pivoted suddenly, throwing herself at Harry and sobbing against him. His own shoulders shaking, Harry wrapped his arms around Luna and pulled her close. Closing his own eyes as tightly as he could, he whispered, "It wasn't enough for that bastard just to kill him. He had to do this. I'm so sorry, Luna... this is all my fault. He's doing this to get to me. I promise you, though..." He paused, unable to trust his own voice to not break. After a moment, he finished, "I'll make him suffer for the rest of eternity for doing this to Leon..."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: Why yes, I AM an evil bastard for doing this. The lead-in should have been pretty telling, but if you didn't guess until Leon said Luna's name, then I guess I succeeded in surprising you. Pretty mean surprise, though, wouldn't you say?

So Voldemort's gone and made it personal. And with that one single action, he's sent Harry down a path that will cause many, many problems far later in the future.

What do I mean? Wait and see, boys and girls. I've unveiled one surprise. But there are still many, many more in store for you.

Post-format edit: Well folks, here it is. The big one. Ending the year with a real bang, huh? So what's in store for 2009? Well, we'll finish book 7 here... then we'll see how book 7 REALLY ends (what the hell does that mean?). Then we'll move on... to the sequel series! Oh, and speaking of sequels, check out my profile. There's a short story that may pique a few interests. I'll see you in January, boys and girls. And maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to wrench Leon back to sanity. Happy New Year's, everyone!

## Chapter 15 – Missing Warmth

"I don't know what they did. I've never seen anything like this. Whatever Voldemort is teaching his Death Eaters, it's different than what they've been doing. At least in this case. The necrotic damage hasn't been reversed, but..."

The doctor blew out a rattling breath, scowling as he stared down at Solieu, who was secured to a wooden platform. Trying to figure out how he had been raised to try and figure out what, exactly, was causing his rage, was proving to be quite difficult. It had been two weeks since Harry's team had brought him in. In that time, they had gone on no further attacks. Harry had called it, stating that until they knew what would happen to their friend, none of them would be in any condition to be out fighting.

His name was Angelo Sventon. He had been leading Ur'terash's medical department for somewhere in the realm of forty-eight years. In all that time, he had only seen a few truly difficult cases where he had to really work to figure out how an undead person had been brought back. Each time, he would slowly work it out and, with that knowledge, Wagner would then be able to help the victim regain rational thought.

His assistant, a shorter woman named Eliza Hartleroy, had worked in the medical department for less than half the time Sventon had. Though she had long since learned to deal with her boss's sometimes aggravating nature, she had also learned to see past what he was saying. The good doctor, especially in recent years, had been having a progressively difficult time properly expressing himself. Wagner had said it had to do with the magic keeping Sventon going starting to ebb from his body. It was one of the reasons he had asked Eliza to become his assistant. He needed someone to pass along his knowledge to.

Standing on the other side of Solieu from Sventon, Eliza glanced up. "They're getting impatient with us, Doctor. Every day, she comes to see him and every day we have to turn her away. Potter seems to be growing irritated as time passes, as well."

"We can't be getting interrupted by them." Sventon said, waving a dismissive hand as he turned, moving a short distance to a table. Reaching out, he grabbed a clipboard that held a series of hastily-scribbled notes. Scanning the document's first page, he scowled again. Flipping through the pages, he shook his head. "Blast it all, it's taking all we have just to keep him sedated enough."

"Small victories." Eliza said, dryly. "Imagine trying to work through the noise."

"Part of me will always be amused that those bastards who brought this poor child back had to sit and deal with his screams for so long." Sventon said, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Only to have him get stolen from them. By the very people he was raised to be used against, no less. Eliza, has Gerald finished working on what the hell caused the abnormal atrophy in the subject's left arm?"

"According to him, it was one of the few side effects from the resurrection process. He said he wasn't sure why, though he thinks the idiots botched the ritual. Under the circumstances, I'd say it's a good guess." Eliza said, walking around to inspect Solieyu's left arm, which was decidedly slimmer than his right. "It wouldn't be the first time we've seen it."

"No, but it is exceedingly rare. If any atrophy is going to occur, it's going to be a symmetrical atrophy of all body parts at once. Having just one spot singled out is bizarre." Sventon said, still scanning his notes. "I must say, he seems quite strong despite his left arm being affected. From what Potter reported, he was assaulting the Death Eaters to the point where they didn't want to get near him. Not half bad, given he was shackled so securely."

"Simple resurrection rage, Doctor. You know that as well as I." Eliza said, glancing over her shoulder.

"Do you really think so?" Asked Sventon. "Doesn't it seem as though his rage would have calmed by now if that were the full story of this? No, I think his anger stems from a completely different source. Perhaps he was told of his fate? Perhaps it was bloodlust. He was a vampire in a former life, after all. We've had almost no experience

dealing with those being brought back. Cursed in life, cursed in undeath."

"Must you always be so gloomy, Doctor?" Eliza asked, sighing.

"Hm? Eliza, I am not being gloomy. Merely seeing reality for what it is. I don't want to let that poor girl in here to see this boy in the state he's in. She has been through enough, I believe. Unless we can find a way to make him calm and coherent, it's best she - all of them, for that matter - not be allowed in."

Eliza was quiet for a moment before turning to face Sventon. "Can I ask something? Off the record?"

"Yes?"

"Sergei said that when he was brought in, he only had one proper moment of clarity, correct?"

"When he saw the girl. Yes, I'm well aware of that and I know where you're trying to take this." Sventon said, roughly dropping the clipboard and turning to face his assistant. "Let me ask you something now. What do you think that young lady's reaction would be if she were allowed in here right now?"

"I think she'd want us to cover him up, for one." Eliza said. "And I think she'd be strong enough to handle it. She isn't a fragile little twig, Angelo. She's followed Potter this far. And if the stories circulating are to be believed, she's dealt with far worse than something of this caliber."

"Yes, but anything approaching this level of closeness? Has anything affected her personally to this extent?" Sventon asked, crossing his arms.

"I don't know. However..."

"However nothing." Sventon said, brushing past the woman and leaning over Solieu, eyes narrowing. In a quieter, almost mumbled

voice, he continued, "Damn you, boy, open your eyes and tell me what's going on..."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry glanced up as the door opened. Tonks slipped inside, looking exhausted. Glancing back across the room and letting his eyes unfocus, Harry murmured, "How is she?"

"Gin's staying with her." Tonks murmured, walking over and sitting next to Harry. "She was still shaking when I left."

"What about you?"

"Dunno. Just feeling sorta numb right now, to be honest. It hasn't had time to really sink in, I guess. What about you? You've been really quiet since they took Leon off to the medical facility." Tonks said, looking aside.

"Angry. Depressed. Blank. Take your pick." Harry replied, closing his eyes. "This is my fault, Nym. I got him killed. I got him brought back. Voldemort knows we're here. After tonight, I have the feeling he knew we were coming for awhile. He certainly had the fucking time to exhume Leon after I went to leave my glasses on his tombstone. It took us too long to get here."

"Getting here sooner wouldn't have stopped it." Tonks said. "Stop blaming yourself. There's no way you could've predicted this."

"What good is this thing..." Harry began, lifting his right arm. "If I can't save anyone with its power? A lot of people died in my crusade to assemble it. And for what? For me to slowly go mad? For Leon to be cursed again? For Luna to suffer? For branding all of you as traitors? I promised him victory, Nym. No matter the cost. And ever since promising him that... hell, even before I promised him that... I've done nothing but fail. I can't return to Hogwarts. I don't know if I have the power to stop Voldemort without losing what little bit of my sanity I'm holding onto. I dunno what I'm going to do to keep the rest of you safe after this is over, because Albus certainly won't let this go. Not after what I've done to him."

Frowning, Tonks leaned against Harry, a hand rubbing slowly at his back. "Breathe, Harry. I know you're taking this hard, but you can't let it eat away at you like this."

"Can't I? Watch me." Harry muttered. "If I died, then turned up months later as a half-rotten ghoul, how would you feel? Even thinking about facing Luna after this makes me shake. I can't imagine she feels very fondly about me right now. Can't say as I blame her, either. She has every right to hate me. I could've gone by myself. Or at least with just Albus and the Aurors. I didn't have to bring Draco and Leon along. I led him to his death. And now look what I've done."

"You didn't do anything." Tonks said, her voice quiet. "Voldemort did this because he knew if he did get found out, you would stop everything once you found Leon. It would give him a chance to regroup."

"Mission accomplished, then. I'm not going back out there until I know whether or not they can save him, Nym. I wouldn't be able to focus. I doubt any of us would. I won't have us fighting when we're not at a hundred percent. I won't give that bastard the satisfaction." Harry growled. "We stay here until we find out, one way or another, what's going to happen to him. I'll talk to Wagner tomorrow."

"Are you sure?" Tonks asked. "Remus and the twins could probably do alright with the city's guards..."

"I'm sure they're all thinking along the same lines as I am." Said Harry, shaking his head slowly. "Besides, we need to stick close to Luna. Or... you girls do, anyway. Draco's useless around women and... well, I dunno what Luna might do if I tried to console her."

"Seemed pretty accepting of it back in the throne room." Tonks murmured.

"That was then. Tomorrow, after she's had a night to think about it, I'm sure things will be different." Harry said, sighing. "Where did things go so wrong? All I wanted to do was track Riddle down and kill him. Every time I try to do something, I keep running into these

horrible roadblocks. It's like fate is trying to keep me from succeeding for some reason."

"Luckily for you, you don't believe in fate, huh?" Tonks said, smiling slightly.

"Yeah. Lucky me." Harry muttered. "Why do you guys do it, Nym?"

"Do what?"

"Stand by me." Harry said, his eyes downcast. "I'm a terrible leader. I make impulsive decisions. I keep getting the people I care about injured or killed or marked as traitors. I have all this supposed power, but I can't properly utilize it. I just don't get why you guys still follow me and believe in me. I haven't believed in myself for awhile now, if I were to be honest. I keep second guessing myself. I can't decide if what I'm doing is best or not. I'm constantly worried that I might get one of you killed. Or worse."

"You might not believe in yourself, Harry, but that's why we're here. That's why we follow you. Because we do believe you can get this done. We don't hear all of that internal monologue stuff you seem to constantly tormenting yourself with. But we're gaining ground on Voldemort. We're doing things to fight back. We're the only ones doing that. Someone has to. I wouldn't want to follow anyone else into battle. For all that you put yourself down, you really are a good leader, Harry, whether you want to believe it or not. We know we can count on you if something bad happens." Tonks said, moving her arm from Harry's back to around his shoulders, tugging him against her.

"Leon felt the same way. Look where it got him." Harry mumbled.

"You keep saying you got him killed. You didn't. That vampire bitch did. You had absolutely no way of knowing she would be there, Harry."

"No, but I let him stay to fight her. I shouldn't have done that."

"You were losing ground, Harry. You had to hurry and get the gemstone." Tonks said, shaking her head. "You can't keep blaming

yourself for each death that occurs in this war. Leon knew what he was getting himself into. Malfoy tried to keep him safe. How do you think he feels right now, Harry? Malfoy's alive because Leon shoved him out of the way of the Killing Curse. He's probably blaming himself for Leon's death even more than you're trying to."

"Draco..." Harry said. "He probably is. Do you think I should go talk to him?"

"No, I don't. I think we all need a little time to ourselves tonight. Except Luna. And you. I think Malfoy can take care of himself." Tonks said. "C'mon. Get changed. We should try to get some rest. I doubt either of us will, but we need to at least try."

Harry looked up as Tonks stood and went to change. Watching her, he murmured, "I still don't see why you lot follow me. You, especially. I haven't been a very good boyfriend at all."

Sighing as she pulled on her nightshirt, Tonks turned to face Harry. "Because I love you, you bloody twit. You're stubborn, you're thick-headed, and you've definitely screwed up more times than I can count. But I love you. Isn't that reason enough?"

Harry glanced away, lowering his head slightly. Watching him for a minute, Tonks smiled faintly before walking back over. Kneeling down in front of him, she murmured, "I've survived this long, haven't I? I've stayed by your side this long, despite a few rough spells, haven't I? I don't plan to let you think you're alone, Harry. You can tell yourself all you want that you're unfit to lead or that it's your fault people keep dying in this war. I know better than that. Because I know the real you. The you that, for all the setbacks you've had in life, refuses to give up. The you that took it upon himself to save the world that's turned its back on you multiple times. The you that I cared for, year after year, when you'd show up at our doorstep, battered and near unconsciousness. You've survived this long. I fell in love with you the moment you defended me from Malfoy, Harry. No one had ever done that for me. No one made me feel special like that. But you, someone I'd only just met, cared enough to not only defend my honor, but defend it against a family like his. You aren't half as stubborn as I am,

Harry. And I don't plan to let you do this alone. Even if everyone else abandons you, I'll be there until the very end, no matter what that end is."

Harry murmured something then, but it was too quiet for Tonks to hear. Bringing a hand up, she placed it on Harry's cheek, pushing so that he faced her way again. Knowing what she wanted, Harry repeated, slightly louder, "Thank you for staying there. Thank you for giving someone like me a reason to live..."

Tonks pulled Harry forward, smiling as his body shook against hers. Whatever he had been feeling, it had obviously been bottled up for awhile. Closing her eyes and rubbing at his back once more, she murmured, "You're an idiot. But you're my idiot."

And, somewhere amidst the sobs, she heard Harry let out a laugh.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Down the hall, Malfoy was also in bed. And, like Harry and Tonks, he knew that he wasn't going to be getting any sleep that night. For the first time since he was very young, before he had the 'proper' way of doing things beaten into him, he hadn't properly changed for bed. His robes were laying in a pile halfway across the room and his shoes had been kicked off somewhere between there and the bed. He had started to take his shirt off, but only got so far as unbuttoning it before he fell backwards into the bed. There, he stared up at the ceiling, trying at once to both not think of anything and to work out what in the hell had taken place that night.

He had had a strange, unsettling pang in his chest ever since coming to the realization that it was Solieu that Harry had brought back with him. Tilting his head to the left, he stared at the two wands sitting on the night stand next to his bed. He had only seen a few of the undead within the city using wands. Would Solieu be able to take his back? Would he even be capable of functioning at a high enough level to know what a wand was? Closing his eyes, Malfoy let out a quiet sigh.

'Why?' He had asked Harry. Why had Solieu pushed him out of the way? It had been his fight, after all. So why had the vampire done

that? More than that, if he regained consciousness and had his memories intact, what would Solieyu think of him now? He had taken the vampire's wand for a number of reasons, the least of which was so that his spirit would at least be present for the final battle. Now his spirit had been shoved unwillingly back into his body. So what importance did the wand even have now?

Looking back up at the ceiling, he sighed again. Potter was, in all likelihood, beating himself up over this. It was simply how he operated. Whenever the slightest thing went wrong, Potter would mope about, taking personal responsibility. Malfoy was quite sure that if Britain somehow underwent a twenty year drought, Potter would work out some kind of faulty logic to make himself the cause of it.

Crossing his arms behind his head, a few hours passed in silence. A silence that was broken around three in the morning by a knock at his door. It took a moment for him to snap out of the daze he had fallen into. Tilting his head slightly to glance the door's way, he called out, "It's open."

Pansy peeked in at an angle. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"Why aren't you?"

Slipping into the room and quietly shutting the door behind her, Pansy leaned back against it. "Too much on my mind."

Malfoy nodded at this, his gaze returning to the ceiling. Pansy watched him for awhile before walking over and sitting on the edge of the bed. "What about you? Thinking about anything in particular?"

"The future." Murmured the blonde.

"What do you mean?"

Malfoy shrugged half-heartily. "I just haven't thought about it yet. After Potter wins, then what? Will we be welcomed back? What happens to Reinhardt? Will he die again after the magic used to bind his soul to his body runs out? Does that happen if the person who did the binding is killed? Apparently they killed all the Death Eaters, so what

happens to him if it was one of them? Did they bring him back here only to see him die again? If we all make it through this... I don't know. I haven't given the end of the war much thought. It's always seemed far away. But this? This made me see how close to the end we are. One way or another."

"Been a long time since I heard you being that morbid." Pansy said. Taking in the state of his room, she added, "And since you were this sloppy. What'd you do, shed clothes as you walked?"

"What reason did I have not to?" Asked Malfoy, closing his eyes.  
"What about you, Pansy?"

"Hm?" Pansy asked, looking back down at Malfoy.

"What are you going to do after this whole ordeal comes to a close?"

"Oh... I dunno. Haven't thought much about it either, if I had to be truthful." Pansy admitted. "Probably end up getting some kind of boring job. I don't see you as the type to get a regular job, though. Plan to take over the Malfoy family name? Bring it back up from the rubble, so to speak? Bring some honor back to it?"

"Actually," Malfoy began, smiling, "I was thinking of just traveling for awhile. Just to get away from it all, you know? Providing we all survive and get welcomed back, we'll probably get lauded as heroes for a bit. You know how the press and its readers are. I don't want that kind of attention."

Pansy was silent for awhile before finally replying, "I'll miss you when you go."

"So come with me."

Smiling sadly down at him, she replied, "That might not be a good idea, Draco."

"Oh? Why not?" Malfoy asked. Opening his eyes, he only just took in the fact that Pansy was leaning over before her lips connected with

his. Eyes widening as they looked up into hers, his body seemed to no longer be responding to what he wanted it to do.

Slowly pulling away, Pansy quickly turned her head, letting out a shaky laugh. "It might get in the way of you and Granger, of course. I don't want to be a third wheel, Draco. It'd get too complicated if I went along. I..."

Her voice hitched then. This, it seemed, was what his body had been waiting for, as he was able to finally move again. Frowning, he pushed himself up. Watching her trying to hide her tears, he finally muttered, "Idiot."

"I know," Pansy whispered, her voice shaking. "I'm sorry. I'll go..."

She shifted forward, aiming to stand up, but she was unable to. In fact, she found herself moving in the direction opposite that which she had planned to go. It took her a moment to understand why. Something moved against her back. Something else was keeping her firmly in place. Glancing down, she saw Malfoy's arms wrapped around her stomach. His chest moving as he breathed was what she had felt against her back. Blinking owlishly, she stared straight forward, not really understanding what was going on.

Then she felt his breath near her ear as he lowered his head and murmured, "Did you really think I didn't know?"

One of his arms moved then, his hand coming up to wipe away the tears streaming down her face. At the same time, he whispered, "I'm sorry for making you cry."

"You didn't..." Pansy began, quickly. "I was just..."

"Granger and I are through. It just wouldn't have worked." Malfoy continued, his arm lowering again. "It's my fault you're upset, Pansy. I've made you wait, haven't I? How long have you cared?"

"I've always cared, Draco..." Pansy said, voice almost inaudible. "But when you were leaving for Azkaban, something changed. For the first time, it felt like I could really lose you..."

Her voice kept breaking as she struggled to get the last sentence out. A sigh escaping his lips, which were still close enough to Pansy's ears to cause her to shudder, Malfoy murmured, "You shouldn't cry, Pansy. If you really want to be with me so badly that it's upsetting you to this extent, then I guess there's simply nothing to be done for it."

Shifting, Malfoy brought his hand back up. And, before Pansy could ask him what he meant, he had gently turned her head to the side, leaning in to kiss her this time. Once more, her body seemed to seize up. When the kiss ended, Malfoy laid back down, looking up at Pansy. After awhile, he cocked an eyebrow and said, "Well?"

It took a few minutes before Pansy could work her mouth well enough to reply, "Well? Well what?"

"Are you going to lay down or not? I want to know whether I need to move over." Malfoy stated.

Blinking, Pansy stared down at Malfoy as though he had grown a second head. Finally, she laughed, despite herself. As she wiped at her eyes, she asked, "Too comfortable to move your royal ass, Draco?"

"My royal ass moved once for you already. It may as well do so again." Malfoy replied, raising both of his eyebrows now.

In a highly undignified way, Malfoy then shifted over to one side of the bed, looking somewhat like a fish trying to navigate dry land. Pansy grinned as she watched him try to move without actually sitting back up. Slipping her shoes off, she stretched out next to him, rolling onto her right side and propping her head up with her hand.

Smiling over at her, Malfoy stated, "I've decided that the two of us simply think too much. We should try to not do so in the future."

"Ah, but you're the one who said he hadn't thought about the future much." Pansy pointed out. "Why do so now?"

"Because I seem to have a reason to look forward to it now." Malfoy said, slipping an arm around Pansy to pull her closer. "Can't imagine how that occurred."

Blushing faintly as she rested her head against Malfoy's left shoulder, Pansy hesitated before moving her left arm across his chest. Fingers lightly curling around his right shoulder, she murmured, "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Thank Potter. He's the one that made this happen, technically. He may fall into periods where he wants to write melodramatic poetry and sulk for days on end, but I believe in him. He'll see this through to the end. Then we can all relax for awhile. I think, however, that the first place we should visit has to be warm. I'm freezing..."

"If you weren't busy being eye candy, you wouldn't be cold." Pansy pointed out, tracing a circle on Malfoy's shoulder.

"I don't hear you complaining." Malfoy pointed out.

"Just sayin'. If you catch a cold, don't expect me to nurse you back to health. We both know how well that went the last time." Pansy said.

Making a face, Malfoy grabbed at the covers with his free hand, pulling it up and over the two of them. "Yes, let's not get to thinking about the incident with the soup. Under the covers it is."

Smiling, Pansy closed her eyes and murmured, "Goodnight, Draco."

Feeling the girl relax against him, Malfoy simply smiled and whispered, "Goodnight."

oOoOoOoOoOo

"How the hell long are they going to make Luna wait?!" Harry growled to no one in particular, punching a wall with his right hand and creating a sizable hole.

"I'm sorry, Harry." Came Balthazar's voice, which dissolved into a sigh.

"What're you sorry for?" Harry asked, walking back to his bed and flinging himself onto it. "It isn't YOUR fault the medical division won't let us in. I could always just force my way in, but I don't particularly want to piss off Wagner."

"If you had access to our notes, you might be able to focus your power better." Balthazar said.

"Your notes?"

"Mm. Do you think my friends and I made the Gauntlet at random? It was after a long, long period of intensive research. We had to think of every conceivable problem the Gauntlet could create and try to figure out a way to combat it, you see. Just in case. Unfortunately, we never got the chance to deal with it directly." Balthazar explained.

"Seems things are a bit different than the tale Albus told me." Harry muttered. "No surprise there, then."

"It probably isn't his fault." Balthazar said. "It has been some time. All tales end up getting changed with time."

"I suppose. So back to the notes you made - where'd you put 'em? I assume I can't just bugger off to wherever it is and get them." Harry said, glaring weakly at the ceiling.

"We assembled them into a grimoire and locked it away for safe keeping. You see, though we tried our best, we slipped further and further into despair as we assembled the materials needed to forge the Gauntlet. The number of lives needed, the fact that it might kill everyone nearby... it was all too much for two of us. I was unfortunate enough to see my good friend destroyed by the Gauntlet's power. It was, however, for the better. You see, Harry, he didn't have the gigantic magic reserves you do. He didn't have the willpower for the task at hand. Even as he tried to become its host, I saw it drive him mad." Balthazar said, his voice growing somber.

"Why not just leave the grimoire with someone you all trusted? To be used against you if the power drove you insane?" Asked Harry.

"We had already risked too much. The townspeople began to threaten us as we worked to gather the materials. People were missing and they rightfully blamed the three crazy old wizards who had supposedly settled into average lives. We had no one to leave it with. And to leave it lying about would be dangerous, as well. Our notes covered a lot of things, Harry. Spells and their effects under the Gauntlet's amplification, tapping into negative energy to utilize as a weapon, how to push the Gauntlet beyond its theoretical breaking point, and so on. I won't have you hunting it down, Harry. The grimoire is dangerous. If you found it, you'd end up getting yourself killed."

"I may end up getting myself killed anyway." Scoffed Harry. "...Do you think your notes could help Leon?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest. I remember us talking about the dead in some regard or another. But my memories aren't as intact as I'd like them to be at times."

"Convenient." Muttered Harry.

"It certainly wasn't to do with bringing them back to life." Balthazar stated. "If anything, it was a series of medical notes. What they might or might not have said is beyond my recollection, however. Now theoretically, we could tap into the negative energies used to bring the dead back to life - the energy is part of what animates the dead - and try to fiddle with it in order to bring your friend back to his senses. However..."

"It's just as likely to seriously damage his soul." Harry finished, swearing under his breath. "Damn it... I feel so bloody useless."

"Focus that anger at Voldemort when you face him." Balthazar said. "You'll need that kind of focus, I feel. When the third lock is released..."

"I know, I know, you've told me a hundred times!" Harry spat. Sighing, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Sorry. But you have. I know that if I were to completely lose my mind, that would be when it occurs. I

know I have to be perfectly focused on killing Voldemort. I can't let myself get distracted. I don't think that'll be a problem. Next time I see that bastard, nothing but killing him will be on my mind..."

"See to it that it is." Balthazar murmured. "I don't know if I'll be of any help once the full force of your reserves is unleashed. I can only try to keep it from getting the better of you. And not ripping the Gauntlet asunder."

"Yeah, that'd be nice." Harry said. "I'm for the whole not losing my right arm thing."

"HARRY!"

Jolting upright at the sound of Tonks' voice, Harry looked over to the door just in time to see his friend burst in. She was grinning, something she hadn't done in a couple weeks now, and was panting.

"Nym, what's up?" Harry asked, pushing himself up from the bed.

"They said they'd let her in!" Tonks said, running over, grabbing Harry by the hand, and pulling him along with her. "Come on. She wants the rest of us to be there when she goes in!"

"I don't need to be dragged." Harry observed, eyebrow raised. "...What changed their mind?"

"Don't know, don't care!" Tonks said. "But we finally get a chance to see him! How the hell long has it been? Like half a month?"

"A little more than that now, yeah." Harry said. "Must have finally gotten to the point where we were the only option left."

"Oh, stop being so bloody negative!" Tonks snapped. "And don't talk like that! I don't want to think about Leon being a lost cause..."

"Neither do I, Nym. I'm just trying to be realistic here." Harry said, pulling his hand away from Tonks'. "I've already braced myself for the worst. Believe me, I'd love to be wrong. Just this once, I would love being wrong."

"Harry?" Said Balthazar.

"Yeah?"

"If they will allow it, I do think I remember one thing we could try. If all else fails, of course." Balthazar said.

"Oh? What is it?" Asked Harry.

"We could always try to impart a small portion of your life energy into him. I'm not promising you it will work - this is still all just theoretical, you understand - but..."

"It's worth a shot. Alright. If it comes down to it, I'll let you guide me." Harry said.

"With any luck, you won't need me to."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Luna? If he starts to react abnormally..."

"I know, Harry."

Nodding, Harry turned and pushed open the door into the room Solieyu was being kept. He was still strapped down, but Sventon and Eliza had gotten him dressed once more. His restraints were glowing faintly and a metallic mask had once more been placed over the lower part of his face. Narrowing his eyes slightly, Harry stepped in, followed closely by the others. Only Eliza was around at the moment, as Sventon had been called into the research department to investigate something else.

"I'm sorry you have to see him this way." The nurse said, smiling apologetically as the group approached. "However, even after all this time, we still haven't been able to snap him fully back to his senses. Every time we think we're getting there, he regresses. I'm sure you've worked out that letting his friends in was a last resort option."

"Yeah..." Harry muttered, walking up to the platform Solieyu was bound to. "...Leon? Hey, Leon, can you hear me? Do you recognize me?"

Solieyu's eyes were open, but he had been glaring up at the ceiling for some time now. When Harry spoke, his eyes slid to the side, narrowing. The two stared at one another for awhile. After a few minutes, Solieyu seemed to relax slightly, seeing that Harry wasn't there to poke or prod him. He returned to glaring up at the ceiling.

Looking up at the nurse, Harry asked, "Has he spoken since that day we brought him in?"

"Nothing coherent." Eliza replied. "Miss Lovegood, if you'd be so kind as to step up? We figure that out of all of you, you'd have the best chance of bringing him back."

Luna nodded, stepping up next to Harry. It was hard seeing Solieyu like this, shackled and miserable as he was. She reached out tentatively, though Solieyu suddenly began to thrash about as it drew close. Seeing her hesitate, Harry reached out, grabbed Luna's hand, and moved it the rest of the way down. When it came to rest on Solieyu's shoulder, the thrashing ceased.

"Solieyu?" Whispered Luna. "It's me..."

Solieyu turned his head once more, looking up at Luna, confusion evident in his sunken eyes. But he said nothing in reply. Harry sighed and stepped back, rubbing his temples slowly. When he moved, Luna did as well so that she could be closer to Solieyu's face.

"I know you recognize me. You said my name the night you were rescued. Do you remember?" Luna asked, giving Solieyu's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Harry and Nymphadora saved you from the Death Eaters who brought you back. You're safe now, Solieyu..."

The vampire's eyes clamped shut suddenly, and he began to struggle against their restraints. He was making a low, guttural growl of sorts. Luna's grip on his shoulder only tightened at this, however. "Remember, Solieyu. Please..." She reached out with her other hand

to touch the boy's face. "You have to remember. Because if you don't..."

Solieyu's eyes opened again, and it seemed like he was struggling against something. His teeth were grit and his muscles, atrophied though they were, had tensed up. His growling had dissolved into a slow, rattling breathing.

"Come back to me, Solieyu." Luna whispered, her voice shaking slightly. "I know it can't be forever. I just want to hear your voice again. I want to tell you all the things I never thought I'd be able to. Please wake up. I know you can. Fight whatever it is that's keeping you this way! We didn't hate you because you were a vampire. We aren't going to hate you because of this..."

Luna glanced up at the nurse, who seemed to know exactly what she was wanting. Reaching out, Eliza removed the face plate. As she set it down on a nearby table, she warned, "Be careful. His teeth are all sharp now."

"He won't hurt me." Luna said, smiling down at Solieyu, who looked for all the world like he was trying to ward off a terrible headache. "I still love you, Solieyu. You don't belong in this medical ward. You belong out there, with us. You were never the type to give up without a fight. Harry's got Voldemort cornered. You can get him back for what he's done to you. But you have to come to your senses first..."

A strange noise rose from Solieyu's throat then, slowly turning into a low hiss. "Lu...na..."

"I knew it." Eliza muttered.

"Solieyu?" Luna said, her heart feeling as though it had skipped a beat. "Are you...?"

"I..." Began Solieyu, his voice rough and deeper than it should have been.

"Do you want something?" Luna asked, quickly.

Solieyu's muscles relaxed all at once. Looking up at Luna, he grinned crookedly as his eyes began to focus. "I... need some aspirin..."

Luna let out a strange sort of laugh, leaning over and hugging Solieyu as best she could. As she stood back up, wiping her eyes, she looked to Eliza. "Can you remove the restraints?"

Eliza nodded and, one by one, opened the shackles keeping Solieyu held down. After the final one had been released, she put a hand on Solieyu's chest. "You're going to probably be feeling very out of place for some time. It's normal. Your body has a new way of reacting to things now, and it's going to take a lot of getting used to. You don't need to breathe, you don't need to eat or drink, and you don't need to sleep. You shouldn't, anyway. You've been a bit of an oddity, so who knows if the 'normal' laws of necromancy apply to you. If your head starts to hurt - if you start hearing a ring that feels like it could grow to deafening proportions - I want you back in here on the double. Understand?"

"Why...?" Solieyu asked, not making any movement to change positions.

"Because it means you might be regressing. If Doctor Sventon had his way, you'd remain in here for testing for at least another week before being released." Eliza explained. "I think you'd recover better out there, with your friends. Miss Lovegood in particular seems good for your health."

Solieyu nodded slowly, closing his eyes again. "I... barely remember anything. Just a lot of pain as I was brought back. Every so often, I'd..." He paused, coughing violently all of a sudden.

"Stop talking so much." Eliza said, smiling sadly. "Your vocal chords are still in bad shape. We'll have to work on you a bit before you're in proper shape. Well... as proper a shape as you can be in, given the circumstances, anyway. If you need to talk, I suggest short bursts. Don't try to rush anything. I know you probably have a lot of questions. If you think you can write, you can always converse that way."

Solieyu's hands flexed slowly. He glanced down at them and made a face. "...Can't feel well."

"It may return in time." Eliza said. "I'm not sure why it's still gone, as you've been 'back' for a fair bit of time now. Perhaps whatever was blocking you from thinking rationally was also blocking the normal recovery of your bodily systems."

"Do you think you can walk?" Asked Luna.

"I think... I'm tired of laying here." Solieyu responded. Mustering a bit of effort, he pushed himself up into a sitting position. He wobbled slightly, but Luna helped steady him. With her help, he slowly got off the table and back onto his feet. Once upright, he gingerly shifted his weight from one foot to the other, checking his balance. "Seems alright..."

"So you won't talk to me, but she snaps you out of it, huh?" Said Harry, walking back over. He was smiling weakly.

"She's prettier." Solieyu replied, shrugging.

"...Leon, look..." Harry began. But before he could get anywhere else, Ginny and Tonks had him by the ears and were pulling him off towards the door. "Gah! Hey! What the hell do you two think you're doing?!"

"Keeping you from angsting the room up!" Tonks stated.

"Come on, Lord Sadsack, we're getting you somewhere else until Leon feels more up to lengthy conversions with you!" Ginny said.

Fight though he did, Harry was still dragged off by the two girls, protesting the whole way. As his voice trailed off, Solieyu looked over at Luna. "...Question."

"Yes, Solieyu?"

"...Where are we?"

oOoOoOoOoOo

A number of miles away, a sickly-looking man was propped up in a makeshift bed. His body was frail, though his mind remained as sharp as it had ever been. He had not predicted this affliction striking at him as hard as it was, though it soon wouldn't matter. His Death Eaters had done well, though the recent failure at the fourth and sixth camps had set them back too much. It was just as well, he thought, that he had devised a multitude of backup plans.

Lord Voldemort let out a quiet hiss as he leaned forward, snakelike eyes narrowing in a wince. Through magic he had been resurrected, and through the same magic he was dying again. Wormtail had been a poor subject, but it had to have happened. The resurrection process could have very easily gone awry, killing the one who had initiated it. Though Lucius had been there from the start that night, Voldemort couldn't risk losing one of his most prized Death Eaters. Not at such an important time.

But Wormtail's skills were pathetic at best, and now here he was. The great wizard Voldemort, rotting in his bed like a sickly Mudblood would. That, however, would soon change. Though his elite had been the ones keeping his camp guarded, he would soon have to say goodbye to one of them. Since the Reinhardt boy had been taken back by Potter, he would simply have to pick one of his own men. It wouldn't be the first time he had been forced to transfer bodies, and it likely wouldn't be the last. When the life force of one grew weak, he would just have to find a better host. And though it wasn't how he had envisioned his life, he would accept it as a necessary evil. Until he could force a body into that of a lich's, thus negating the need to host-jump, Voldemort had to keep a very close watch on his own mortality.

Someone entered the small tent, causing the Dark Lord to look up. The Death Eater walked over and knelt next to the bed before removing his mask. "My Lord."

"Lucius." Breathed Voldemort, his voice quiet and shaky. "What news do you bring?"

"The idiots in the field continue to screw up at the simplest of jobs and camp three has been lost to one of Wagner's assault squads. They came in the night, as per usual, and wiped the lot of them out before they knew what was going on." Said Lucius Malfoy, keeping his head bowed.

"You come bearing only bad news?" Asked Voldemort.

"No, My Lord. There are a few bits of good news to report. Jacobs managed to strike a deal after all."

"Ahh, he wasn't killed, then!" Cackled the Dark Lord. "Excellent, excellent. Did he have anything to say?"

"Just that reinforcements are en route now, My Lord. They're expected to arrive within a month's time." Lucius said, a small smile rising on his face. "In addition, Loken has finished work on your phylactery. ...That leaves the distinct problem of your health..."

"My health woes will soon clear." Voldemort stated, pausing briefly to cough. "...And you, my dear Lucius, will be the one to ensure that."

Daring a glance up, Lucius asked, "My Lord?"

A withered hand slipped out from under the thicket blanket on the bed. And, in a move that defied the Dark Lord's condition, shot out to grip tightly around Lucius' throat. As Lucius began to gasp for breath, his hands coming up to clutch at Voldemort's arm to try and pull it away, Voldemort just grinned, his eyes gleaming in the dim light filtering in through the flap in the tent.

"Consider yourself lucky, Lucius." Purred Voldemort, his grip on the elder Malfoy's neck tightening. "You are about to fulfill a role precious few will ever fulfill. You will, in a word... ascend."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: So Leon has been snapped back to his senses, Harry is being emo as per usual, Malfoy is grumpy but has now accepted Pansy, and we finally see why the hell Tom has been so quiet as of

late! I'm sure a few of you were wondering why he hadn't been seen or heard from since the end of Citadel. Well, now you know. Shortly after Azkaban was reclaimed, his body began to deteriorate. He knew it was coming, as he had Death Eaters out in Germany for some time prior. Once it actually began to occur, he moved his base of operations out that way.

His original plan, of course, was to use Leon's body. Fortunately for our dear vampire, Harry managed to save him from a fate worse than undeath.

See you all next time! And happy new year!

## Chapter 16 – Invasion

Solieyu Reinhardt walked slowly through the halls of Ur'terash. He had been given a fresh set of robes, which he had been thankful for. He had taken to keeping the hood up at all times, hating his own appearance now. His hair, once one of the few things he had been proud of, had been ruined by death. The Death Eaters, he vaguely recalled, had also ripped out a fair amount of it. His skin was even more sickly-looking than it had been in life, and bone showed through in many places. Magic was all that was binding him to this shambling form. It had been a few days since Luna had helped him back to reality. And, bless her, she had stayed by his side since. She had been the one to sit and explain, over the course of nearly a whole night, what had been going on since his death.

It all seemed so wrong to Solieyu. He had gone to Azkaban to help Harry solidify his chances at victory. He had gone to help unite the dissenters. He had gone so that Voldemort could be put in his place. Instead, he had met only death and Harry was apparently slipping further and further into the same type of madness that Solieyu had been controlled by upon his resurrection. He had attacked Dumbledore on more than one occasion, their friends were all labeled traitors despite their intentions, and things were in more turmoil than they had been when Voldemort had been in control of the floating island prison.

Pausing long enough to notice his own reflection in an ancient-looking suit of armor that stood in the corridor, Solieyu narrowed his eyes. His sight and his hearing were the only two senses that still functioned as they should. And while he would have gladly welcomed the ability to not smell blood constantly while alive, now he simply couldn't smell anything at all. His sense of taste was obviously destroyed as well, since he no longer needed to eat or, indeed, had the working organs needed to process food. And his sense of touch had been altered by the magic that had brought him back. He couldn't feel anything that didn't have at least a little magic within it. His own robes, for instance, had been magically enchanted by the other undead within the city so that he could have an active awareness of it. Other things, like a simple cup, he wasn't able to hold without great focus. He couldn't judge the strength he used to grip it.

He missed feeling warmth or cold the most, as he simply existed in an in-between state now. He could, much to his great delight, still manage to feel when Luna held his hand. But the warmth he had always known to accompany that feeling had been noticeably absent. He turned from the suit of armor and continued walking, his hands quietly slipping into the pockets of his robe. What he had done to deserve someone as wonderful as Luna, he didn't know. She acted like he wasn't a walking horror. She acted like he wasn't rotting. She acted... like nothing had ever happened. She was all that staved off the absolute misery he had otherwise been left with. He had been told that, until he trained extensively, he wouldn't even be able to use his own wand again. It was different now, requiring a different method of tapping into that power.

He had been pleased to hear that Malfoy had been in possession of his wand and that it had been put to good use. He and Malfoy had had a talk about that very subject, in fact. It had been rather short, as neither knew quite what to say. Solieyu had told Malfoy exactly what Dr. Sventon had told him and had said that until he reached that point, Malfoy should keep using his wand. He wouldn't be able to fight alongside them in person. But his will would be there through his wand.

Solieyu knew Harry was taking his resurrection personally, as well, despite telling him it wasn't his fault. Harry couldn't have known that he would have been targeted. And though Harry had tried valiantly to argue that he was, in fact, a terrible person who couldn't protect his friends, even in death, Solieyu had been the one to end the discussion. Even cutting through the twinge of madness that seemed to be ever-present with his old friend, Solieyu knew exactly what to say to get Harry out of his funk and back into leader mode. And that was exactly what Harry had done. Motivated back into action, he had gone off to see Sergei Wagner to discuss taking down the remaining encampments around the great undead city. That was where Solieyu was presently headed, as well. Though he had been back for some time, he still felt... creaky. He had to walk and move around a lot to get used to his new body.

As he approached the throne room, he could hear voices. Harry and Wagner were in a rapid-fire debate over which direction to send their admittedly low number of assault squads in. Stopping in the doorway, Solieyu leaned to one side as he listened.

"I know you're concerned." Wagner said. "But we can take care of ourselves. We have so far. Though I appreciate the thought, we should focus purely on offense right now."

Harry shook his head. "If the city was attacked when we were all out..."

"Then they would eventually run afoul of me." Wagner said, reaching out and putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You know how strong I am, Harry. You know exactly how strong I can be. Now picture that power unrestrained. Picture what I could do if angered."

Harry glanced up when the skeletal hand came to rest on him. And, for the briefest of moments, it felt to him like it was Dumbledore standing across from him. Blinking a few times, Harry looked down at the battle map. "Point taken." He murmured. Scanning his eyes across the map for a second, he asked, "I still want to know why he hasn't rebuilt the camps we destroyed the night we found Leon."

"Might be unable to spare the men." Jeremiah Rhodes stated. "We've been watching the main camp since then. Something's going on. We just can't get close enough to work out what."

"Something? Anything beyond 'something,' captain?" Harry asked.

Shrugging, Rhodes motioned toward the spot on the map that represented Voldemort's camp. "Seems there's messengers coming and going constantly. What that means is anyone's guess. He could be seeking recruits to replace the ones we killed that night. He could be sending out notices for more bodies. Who knows what goes through a madman's mind."

"I do." Harry muttered. "I've been in his head a time or two. Riddle's a very scared man deep down. He wants nothing more than to remain alive. And if your reports on his possible health issues are true, he's

on a timer. He's inhabited the bodies of others before. The Defense Against the Dark Arts professor in my first year at Hogwarts comes to mind. But that was before he got his body back. I don't know if he could... transfer himself like that now that he's locked down, as it were."

"Entirely possible." Wagner said. "Especially for a wizard of his caliber."

"Ah, but therein lies the issue - is he healthy enough to perform whatever needs to be done to jump bodies?" Harry asked. "For all we know, he's bedridden. I haven't been able to feel a damn thing from him through my scar in ages. I woke up a few nights ago and it was stinging a bit, but that doesn't mean anything. The idiot could've cursed someone and got a smile from it. I try not to tap into the connection any more than I need to."

"Which leads us back to what we're doing." Said Irons, looking as grim as ever. "Do we take down the camps? Or do we head for the source of the infection?"

Pushing away from the door frame, Solieyu stepped on into the room. "He'll get more."

Harry glanced over his shoulder, smiling crookedly at his friend. "Hey, Leon. How're you feeling?"

"About as well as I look." Solieyu said. Glancing down at the battle map for a second, he nodded. "He'll get more. No sense taking them out."

"He's right." Harry said. "We can kill all the Death Eaters he has. He'll get more in. Who knows how many are working for him. His best are all probably holed up at the main encampment. But it still leaves quite a number of others out there. He's not stupid enough to bring in all of his forces at once."

"He isn't stupid." Solieyu said, his voice low. It still hurt to talk, and his vocal chords still didn't want to respond correctly. Rubbing at his throat, he scowled. "...Attack him directly."

"Would you be able to defend the city from his Death Eaters if we kept the main forces busy?" Asked Harry, looking across the table at Wagner.

A long, low breath was sucked in. Blowing it out slowly, Wagner replied, "I'm sure I could. It depends on how long it takes you to take him down."

"Well, once I get serious, I'll only have a single minute to trigger the Susceptor." Harry said. "The trouble is breaking through his Death Eaters, along with any other undead creatures he has with him."

"Indeed. I'm strong, Harry, but my power is finite. He could be waiting for the city to be relatively unattended. If he's going to switch bodies due to his health failing him, who knows what he'll end up as. We don't know any better - he could transfer himself into an ogre. It'd certainly help his survivability."

"He wouldn't 'lower' himself to that." Harry said. "If anything, he's most likely to shanghai one of his Death Eaters. Keep in human form. If he's aiming to become a lich like you, he'll want to keep a strong body. Gotta survive the transformation, after all."

"Also true." Wagner agreed. "I'm just saying, if he's waiting in the wings for you to make a move, he could send his remaining forces to storm my city. And while I would defend it with my life, it would be difficult without aid. The further I go from the city, the more my powers weaken."

"Phylactery?" Harry asked.

"In part." Wagner said. "Though it isn't being kept within the city itself. No one will find it, I assure you. However..."

"Power limiter?" Asked Solieyu.

"Something like that. Unfortunately, being undead, I'm far more susceptible to certain spells than I would be if alive. Though torches line the walls of the city, I am no fan of fire. The only reason they burn

is because I try to make this place as comforting to others as possible. Most don't think of fire the way I do."

"At least you can feel it." Solieyu gruffed.

"Are your senses still not responding?" Asked Wagner.

"Sight and sound are. Touch is only with magical things." Solieyu stated.

Wagner looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding. "I see. I may be able to help you with that, Mr. Reinhardt. However..."

"Not top priority at the moment. Yeah." Solieyu agreed. Glancing aside at Harry, he asked, "Well?"

"Well what?" Harry asked.

Solieyu motioned toward the map.

Sighing, Harry shook his head. "Hell, I dunno. Part of me wants to launch an all-out assault on his main camp just to try and catch him off guard. If we can get to him before he switches to a new body, we'll have a major advantage."

"If he hasn't already." Irons muttered.

"Yeah." Harry said, making a face. "If he hasn't already..."

Footsteps running toward the throne room caused the assembled group to turn. A guard, looking panicked, rushed in and pointed back the way he came. There was blood splashed across his robe and his outstretched hand was visibly shaking. "Lord Wagner! We're being attacked!"

Wagner quickly crossed the room, eyes narrowing. "Where?"

"The Dead Gate! Voldemort's amassed a strike force! He's got a giant with him out there!" Cried the guard.

"Damn, we've been too slow!" Harry spat.

Wagner grabbed the guard by the shoulders. "Calm down, son. How many have been attacked and what kind of forces are we looking at? How many did he bring? Who's leading the charge?"

The guard took a ragged breath before nodding. "We... almost all of us in the western vanguard... we were ambushed. They came through the darkness and struck without warning! The giant took down most of us. I was able to scramble in through the Gate without being noticed, I think. I know a few others were behind me, but..."

"No others have entered." Wagner finished. "They're in my city."

Nodding again, the guard continued, "He had nearly fifty Death Eaters with him. Fortunately a good number are keeping the giant in check, if you could even call that fortunate. I didn't get a good look at the commander's face, but I heard his voice. There was no mistaking, my Lord. It was Lucius Malfoy..."

"Leon? Would you mind terribly getting the others?" Harry asked, pulling his wands and glancing once more down at the battle map. "...Tell Draco his father's come to visit."

Solieyu nodded and turned, striding out of the room as fast as he dared move. He knew the route back to Harry's section of the city, though he hadn't chose to stay there himself. He did, however, pick a room close to the others. Despite Luna trying to convince him otherwise, he didn't feel right sharing a room with anyone. He was in no condition to be even holding Luna, let alone anything else. Bony fingers clenching into a fist, he let out an almost guttural growl. He knew he would be incapable of fighting, and it angered him to no end. Death Eaters had brought him screaming back into this world and he couldn't be kind enough to send them screaming out of it.

The ground shook as he rounded a corner, nearly throwing him off balance. Looking back the way he came, he saw a handful of guards running across an intersection, yelling something about the eastern wall being attacked. Whether the shaking had been caused by the giant or something else, Solieyu wasn't sure. He wasn't particularly

fond of either idea. Picking his pace up, he reached Harry's section of the city a few minutes later. And, wincing at even the thought, he called out, "WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!"

As doors began opening, people entered the hall to find Solieyu leaning against a wall, clutching at his throat and coughing. Luna rushed over, asking what was wrong. But Solieyu just shook his head, whispering that he had to get everyone's attention quickly and that his throat was simply strained. He gave the group the quickest overview of the situation as he could.

"Be careful." Solieyu whispered as the group began to leave.

"I will." Luna promised, kissing a fingertip and placing it against Solieyu's nose.

As she left, Solieyu turned. "Malfoy."

"Hm?"

"There's something you should know..."

oOoOoOoOoOo

The wand in his left hand shook violently, causing him to glance down at it. It wanted to be back with its proper master, he assumed. Narrowing his eyes, he looked back up, following the others to where the fight was taking place. From the sound of it, Potter and the others were already engaged in combat. Every so often, the giant would let out a roar that would cause tremors that made the stone walls of the city to rattle.

His father... how dare that man show his face after all this time. But that was what he had been waiting for, hadn't it? That exact thing. He wanted to see his father again, because he was going to be the one to slaughter the man like the filthy dog he was. How could he think that serving Voldemort was the correct way? How could he have so thoroughly lost his pride and honor that he would lower himself before anyone?

Gripping Solieu's wand tighter, Draco Malfoy gritted his teeth. They were approaching the Gate that had been assaulted, and the air was crackling with magical energy. Potter's was unmistakable - he burned the air around him when he was casting these days. Malfoy suspected the lack of control to be why the Ravenclaw was always so weakened after his fights. He had a great bit of power, but no one had taught him how to control it. He was doing the best with what he had. But it was essentially two wizards dealing with more power than either had seen, neither of which knew quite what path to take.

As they neared the Gate, the people ahead of him began to run out, casting at the first things they saw. Malfoy was no different. Most of the people on their side were focused purely on the giant. To their credit, they were managing to keep it occupied enough that it wouldn't storm the entrance any more than it already had.

Wagner himself was keeping as close to the city's entrance as he could, taking shots at Death Eaters. Malfoy wasn't worried about him, as the man was dropping each Death Eater he hit in one shot. And Potter...

The Ravenclaw was off fighting a man that looked for all the world as though he had just escaped a performance as a mummy. Almost every visible part of him was tightly wrapped with bandages, some of which were bloodstained. The only part of him that anyone could see was his mouth. Malfoy narrowed his eyes again. Not only was that man clearly his father, but he was also giving Potter an incredibly hard time. Harry was obviously frustrated at how little an effect he was having on the elder Malfoy.

Rushing forward, Malfoy brought his wands up and, as Potter dropped back and to the side, he let loose a pair of violent slashing hexes. Lucius jerked his head to the side and managed to raise a shield in time to block the spells, which dissipated on it. How the man was even keeping track of where to look was hard to tell, what with his eyes being completely covered and all.

"Having a tough time, Potter?" Malfoy asked, keeping his wands trained on his father. "Tag out. I'll handle Lucius. You go and do something about that damnable giant."

"Can't do that..." Harry panted, wincing as he shifted his weight to his right foot. "Something isn't right. I don't think that's Lucius, either..."

"It's him." Malfoy said. "I can tell. Why the hell are you having a hard time with him?"

"Like I said... I don't think it's him. I think Voldemort got to him..." Harry said.

"...How so?"

Throwing his strongest shield up as Lucius began wildly casting at the two of them, Harry yelled, "I don't know, dammit! But I can't put a dent in on him, he's keeping an even keel with me, and my bloody scar's hurting so badly, I can't think straight! I'm not pawning him off on you, that'd be suicide!"

"I think I've earned this chance, Potter! Voldemort or no, I'm the one who's going to kill Lucius, not you!" Malfoy barked. "You just said you can't think properly, didn't you?! So go and make yourself useful elsewhere! Let me handle this."

"The last time I let someone try to handle his stupid vendetta alone, he wound up dead! I'm not making that mistake again!" Harry roared, launching himself at Lucius. "Imperium Potentia!"

A spiral blast of orange magic shot from the tip of Harry's wand, split into three separate beams as it flew through the air, and pierced Lucius Malfoy's upper body. The force of the impact sent him flying back and into a tree. A guttural growl escaping his lips, Harry pumped more magic into the attack, causing Lucius to let out a howl of pain. The trio of beams pushed their way out through the tree's trunk, lashing back and forth in the air.

"If you want to kill him, then go kill him!" Harry ordered, glaring at the blonde over his shoulder. "I'll keep him pinned down!" When Malfoy hesitated, Harry continued, "You can't beat him in a fair fight, damn it! If you want to finish him, this is your only chance! Now get to it before I do it myself, you idiot!"

"Call me an idiot again and you'll be the one pinned to the tree!" Malfoy shouted, running past Harry, drawing his wands behind him.

But just as Malfoy was about to bring the wands forward, another pair of cleaving spells ready to remove his father's head from his shoulders, the elder Malfoy stopped screaming. Not only did he stop screaming, he moved his head to stare straight at his son, his own wand raising.

"Phoebus Terminum!" He snarled. A small, black orb shot from his wand, crashing into Malfoy's chest. As though he knew what was coming, Malfoy quickly tried to get his own attack off. But he was too slow. Before he could even get his arms all the way forward, the small orb expanded, lifting Malfoy off his feet. Driving him through the air, the orb began to rotate as it smashed Malfoy back and into the side of the Gate. It cut through his clothes and began to chew through the underlying flesh as he let out a pained cry.

Malfoy wasn't sure what happened after that. The next thing he knew, he was slumped over next to Wagner, who knelt and quickly began to attend to the blonde's wounds as best he could. He tried to speak, but only managed to cough up blood. The pain echoed through his body, nearly causing him to black out. Clearly, Wagner had gotten him away from his father's spell.

"Him!" Malfoy finally managed to choke out. "Go kill him! I'll be fine!"

"Harry is handling things." Wagner said, his voice making it clear that there would be no objecting. "And stop squirming. You'll reopen the wound. I'm having a hard time keeping it closed as it. You're not going to be eating anything for days..."

Across the battlefield, Lucius was moving closer toward Harry, despite the three-ended spell still piercing his upper body. His mouth contorted into a grin. "Those who abandon the Dark Lord will always get what is coming to them. Those who anger him will face a fate worse than that. Tell me, Potter... what type of death would you prefer? A quick death? A slow death? Sacrificing yourself to save your friends?"

"Never gave it much thought." Harry said, ending the spell so he could defend himself from anything Lucius tried to use. "Because I don't plan to be the one who dies. I know you're in there somewhere, Tom. I don't care what your appearance is. I will kill you for what you've done."

Lucius stopped. His grin grew wider and his voice deepened somewhat as he murmured, "Ah yes... finding the good Mr. Reinhardt. What a shame it was that we weren't able to unveil him to you in the method we had so desperately wanted. But he still served his purpose - he delayed you long enough for my other followers to arrive!"

"Other followers?" Harry repeated, his eyes darting to the giant for a brief moment. "...How the hell many do you have?"

"You'd be surprised just how effective I am at keeping things hidden when I wish to." Lucius purred.

"I'll give you one chance to leave, Tom." Harry said, a smirk rising on his face.

"...You? Giving me a chance to flee?" Lucius said, frowning. "...My dear boy, I don't think you have any idea what kind of position you're in!"

"Your forces are dwindling and your giant is having troubles standing. The only reason Wagner hasn't turned his gaze on you is because he's busy keeping Draco healed." Harry said. "How much longer do you think this pathetic invasion attempt will last?!"

"Invasion? Harry, Harry, Harry... this wasn't an invasion! This was a warning. A warning that while you've been resting on your laurels, I have been amassing a small army of followers. And when the time is right, we will return to Britain, destroying everything in our path!"

"Ohh? Going to kill Albus? That's my job, Tom. I won't let you take that pleasure away from me!" Harry said, grinning.

"It is good to see we agree on one thing, at least. A shame I'll never be able to convince you to join me." Lucius said, sighing. "...But perhaps I just wish to ask too soon. Given time, I'm sure you'll start to come around to my way of thinking. One way or another."

Lucius' head moved slightly. And though Harry couldn't see which way he was looking, he had a feeling it was toward the Gauntlet. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means whatever you wish it to mean. We really must stop this, Harry. After all... letting yourself chat with your sworn enemy in the heat of battle is a good way to get people killed. Do you really have time to be talking to me when my friend is about to have such a fit?"

Harry looked back at the giant quickly. A large hole had been somehow drilled through its left shoulder. The amount of blood pouring out was painting the ground under it red, and it was splashed across most of the people who had been fighting it. It was howling in either pain, anger, or both, and was turning to grab at a rather large tree that was nearby.

He turned to look back toward Lucius... or Voldemort, whichever of the two was currently at the helm... but he wasn't there. Spinning around, Harry saw that the man had apparently taken the chance to escape. Swearing under his breath, Harry turned and ran over toward the giant. "Second lock, Balthazar!"

"Are you sure? You're already winded..." Replied the ghost.

"Gonna need enough power to topple that damn thing over! We can rest afterward!" Harry said. "Now open the damn locks!"

"...As you wish." Said the ghost.

Harry disappeared from sight as Balthazar slid the correct gears away from the holes they were covering. Swirling magical beams burst forth, crossing the room and slamming into the opposite wall, their force putting a strain on the other gears. Moving as quickly as he could, the ghost opened the opposing gears to allow the magic through. He stepped back, wondering how the hell he could even feel

winded, when a stray tongue of magic shot out, nearly colliding with him. Looking up quickly, he saw that the two beams were moving erratically. Every so often, rogue shots would fly out in random directions. The sounds of them colliding with bits of the clock tower echoed throughout.

"...We can't keep doing this." Balthazar whispered, swallowing hard. "It's going to collapse in on itself at this rate. If that happens..."

Harry knew he didn't have much time, and he knew he had one good shot to end this fight in. He wasn't able to move around with the magical currents, but he damn well could still apparate. And apparate he had, up into the air near the giant's head. It was just standing back up from uprooting the tree. Harry wasn't going to let it get a chance to use it as a club. This was going to look absolutely absurd, but he didn't care, so long as it got the job done.

As soon as he appeared in the air, he jabbed both wands out forward. And then he let himself fall. As he fell beyond the giant's stomach, he jerked his wands over his head and yelled, "SECTUMSEMPRA!" And, before he crashed to the ground head-first, he apparated away again, calling out, "GET OUT OF THE WAY!"

The twin spells smashed into the giant's body and, in particular, its head, which was out further than the rest of it. Though Harry missed the thing's eyes, he had done enough to mortally wound the giant. The spells carved into its flesh, forcing their way through the bone and muscle until they gave out. Letting out an almost unearthly wail, the giant dropped the tree, pawing at its own face. It only served to make the wounds worse, however, and it soon fell to its knees, its breathing coming out ragged and weak.

But somewhere within, the giant still had its fighting spirit. It reached out, grabbing blindly for the tree it had dropped, and latched onto it once more. Mustering all of its willpower, the creature started to rise again, letting out a scream that shook the land itself.

And, just as suddenly as it seemed to get its second wind, the tree fell back to the earth. The giant, now with an equally large spike impaling

the left side of its head, only managed a weak, confused whimper before it toppled over onto its right side.

Harry, a crazed look in his eyes, was standing across the battlefield, the tips of his wands touching and aimed at the giant, as though daring it to try getting back up. Slowly, he began to move toward the fallen creature, keeping his wands aimed. He couldn't hear the victory cries from his friends, nor from the guards of Ur'terash. All he cared about was ensuring that the giant wasn't going to try something again.

Well, there was certainly only one way to ensure that. Mouth splitting in an equally crazed grin, Harry apparated up onto the giant's shoulder, which was still pouring blood onto the ground. With both wands aimed for the creature's neck, Harry began to laugh.

Seconds later, the earth shook again as something explosive collided with it. Harry looked down at his handiwork, quite pleased that he had managed to remove the giant's head from the rest of it, despite the mess it had caused. Merely separating it would have been too careless - someone could have reanimated it, after all. But causing it to explode? Yes, that would do the trick quite nicely! Without a head, there was no chance of it coming back!

Wagner watched this display near the gate, alongside Malfoy, who had long since managing to sit up.

"He's going insane." Wagner stated.

"Going?" Malfoy repeated. "I think he's been insane for some time now. He's just a very convincing actor."

"...Will he be capable of fighting Voldemort?"

Letting himself lay back down, Malfoy tried to block the frenzied laughter as he replied, "He'll be able to. I'd say that that's the only thing keeping some part of him attached to any form of sanity that MIGHT remain. If anything's keeping him going, it's killing Voldemort. What's going to stop him from taking Riddle's place, however..."

"We will stop him, should it come to that." Wagner said. "It is surely what he would want."

"Just the same..." Malfoy said, looking off to the side. The guards, alongside Harry's other friends, looked unsettled at what they had just witnessed. None were making any sign of wanting to approach. "...I hope it never comes to that. Voldemort is bad enough. ...I don't want to think about what it would take to stop Potter."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: Yuh-oh. Harry's goin' plum loco, it seems! Will he be able to overcome the madness? Or will it bring him down and ruin everything he's struggled so hard to achieve? I guess there's only one way to find out the answer to that, huh?

We're entering the final bit of the book now. I only have 24 chapters planned, and we all know how my plans go. If I wind up with a few more or a few less, it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone.

That being said, if the book does technically end up being shorter, it'll still go on for a long time. But explaining that would ruin the surprise. Seeya next time, kids...

## Chapter 17 – Noise

Draco Malfoy sat up, shirtless, in bed. He had been glaring down at the scar on his stomach for over an hour now. Unfortunately, it wasn't making the thing go away. He had already received one scar across his upper body. He didn't need another. Finally, blowing out a sigh, he let his head loll back. Eyes slipping shut, he muttered into the silence of his room, "To think I was once jealous of Potter's. The hell was I thinking?"

"You should be worried. Your beautiful body's once more been marred, Draco. What if I'm too shallow to stay with you now?" Came a voice from the doorway.

Cracking an eye open, Malfoy leveled Pansy with a withering look. She grinned and slipped into the room properly, closing the door behind her. Walking over, she sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Malfoy's stomach, frowning.

"Does it still hurt?" She asked.

"Sometimes. Made the mistake of stretching when I woke up. Won't be doing that again anytime soon." Malfoy replied, closing his eyes again.

"You still sound drugged. Sventon keeping you well medicated, huh?" Pansy asked, slipping in next to Malfoy and leaning against him.

"Thankfully." Malfoy murmured. "It's a pain that's going to linger, though. I'm going to feel it on cold mornings."

"You never answered my question." Pansy said, smiling again as she nudged Malfoy.

"If you're too shallow to stay with my for my body, I'll simply have to give you other reasons to stay with me." Malfoy responded, tilting his head to catch the blush that rose on Pansy's face. "Acceptable reply?"

"No comment." Pansy said, staring down at her hands.

Malfoy smirked, scooting away from Pansy far enough to lay down. As he moved, he sucked in a sharp breath and winced. "Damn it..."

"You alright?" Pansy asked.

"Not particularly." Malfoy grunted, rubbing his new scar gingerly. "Aside from this damn thing, I'm growing increasingly nervous over whether Potter will actually be able to keep it together long enough to see this through. I know I said I believed in him, but... that laugh..."

"Yeah..." Pansy said, voice quiet. "It spooked me, too. I hate seeing him that way..."

"Hard to think of anything else but Potter, Lucius, and this blasted scar right now." Said Malfoy, bitterness in every word. "Starting to think I should ask the doctor for some Dreamless Sleep just to get away from it all for a bit."

Laying down beside him, Pansy asked, "What would you rather think about?"

"Had fun talking about the future last time." Malfoy admitted, giving the girl a weak smile. "It helps, looking beyond this war..."

"So let's do that again." Pansy said, snuggling up carefully beside Malfoy. She kept her left arm at her side, not wanting to drape it over the blonde's scar. "How about a family?"

"Do what?" Malfoy asked, blinking owlishly.

Snorting, Pansy gestured vaguely in the air. "The future! A family! Surely you've thought about having one of your own again at some point!"

"Not really..." Malfoy said, still blinking.

"Would you like to have one?" Asked Pansy.

"If everything calms down? And we're allowed to lead at least somewhat normal lives again? I guess it wouldn't be bad. Bring up a kid better than we were. One that wasn't forced to follow some stupid nonsense and live in constant fear..." Malfoy said, his voice getting very far away as he spoke.

Pansy watched him closely as he talked. His eyes would focus and unfocus as he gazed up at the ceiling, and he seemed to suddenly look much older than he was. Resting her head on his shoulder, she murmured, "How about a name? If we had a little boy at some point, what kind of name would you want for him?"

"About the only thing I like about my lineage these days is my name." Malfoy stated. "I'd like to keep the general theme going if at all possible. I'm sure I'll have to fight you tooth and nail on the matter, but..."

"But...?" Pansy pressed.

"Hydrus." Malfoy said, glancing off.

"Hydrus?" Pansy echoed, a grin forming. "Middle name?"

After a brief moment of thought, Malfoy stated, "Zirnitra."

"Bit out there, isn't it?" Asked Pansy.

"Of course not. The first name references hydras - must keep a strong first name, after all. The middle is for the Slavic god of sorcery. ...Who also happens to be a dragon." Malfoy said.

"Yooou've thought this out before tonight, haven't you?" Pansy asked, grinning fully now.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Of course not." Malfoy declared.

"Liar. You thought that name up too quickly!" Pansy giggled. When Malfoy's lower lip jutted out ever so slightly, her laughter intensified. "I

knew it! You have thought about it before! Alright then, you have me curious now! What if our child is a girl?"

Malfoy made a face at that. "A girl? Hm... I suppose that is a possibility, isn't it?"

"Fifty-fifty chance, I'd say." Pansy said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, then. What kind of name have you thought up beforehand for a girl?"

"Girls aren't well-suited to dragon-related names..." Malfoy drawled. "Tell you what. I'll make you a deal here and now. A promise, if you'd like. If and when we have a child, if it's male, I get to name him. And if it's a girl, you get to name her. Sound fair?"

"Hmm... yeah, I suppose." Pansy said, closing her eyes. "So I get to choose, huh? Well... if you're going with dragons, I suppose it's only fitting that I go with flowers, isn't it?"

"Please don't make it too girly..." Malfoy groaned.

"Oh, I won't make it something that would embarrass us, of course. Alright, what about Viola?" Asked Pansy. "That's elegant sounding enough, yeah?"

"I suppose it depends on the middle name. Hydrus Zirnitra Malfoy flows well. Have one picked out?"

"Hmmm..." Pansy said, rolling onto her back and tapping at her chin thoughtfully. "How... about... Alexandria?"

"Viola Alexandria Malfoy?" Malfoy said. "...I like it." He then suddenly got a strange grin on his face as he turned to look at Pansy.

"...What?" Asked the girl.

"What if it was twins? I can't imagine what you'd look like carrying even one child around, let alone two." Malfoy said, biting back a laugh.

"Now I know your meds are in full effect." Pansy said. Rolling back onto her side, she poked Malfoy's arm. "And for your information, even if I was carrying a dozen children, I would remain thin and proper."

"A dozen children. You sure you haven't been sneaking some of my medication?" Asked Malfoy.

"Oh, why don't you just go to sleep, O Mighty Dragonlord?" Pansy muttered, sticking her tongue out.

Chuckling, Malfoy murmured, "Not a bad idea. Staying for the night?"

"When am I not?" Asked Pansy. "Think your stomach'd be okay if I had my arm across your chest like normal?"

"Should be." Malfoy said. "It isn't like it's causing me intense pain when I'm keeping still. More a dull, constant ache, really. I just can't exert myself or stretch well."

"Ahh. Well, if you're sure." Pansy said, moving her left arm. "Let me know if it gets to be too bothersome, okay? No trying to be a tough guy on this one."

"This what life'll be like on down the road? Me, laid up in bed from work-related injuries while you backseat nurse me to health?" Asked Malfoy. Pansy swatted him lightly on the shoulder. "Hey, just asking."

"You're very weird when you're drugged." Pansy said. "How much longer are they planning to keep you on the painkillers?"

"Few more days, I'd guess." Yawned Malfoy. "Getting fed up of not doing anything all day. I'm not the type to just sit and read like Potter is. I'd be happy if I could be out training. I'm sure that's what he's doing. I know Wagner was going to talk to him about that."

"Just as well you're in here. Definitely glad I'm not Tonks right now. Harry's been on the warpath ever since the attack." Pansy sighed. "I guess I can understand. He's frustrated, he let the madness get the

better of him in a moment of panic, and between those things and probably still blaming himself for what happened to Reinhardt..."

"He's buckling under the load finally." Malfoy finished, shaking his head. "Well... if anyone can help Potter unwind, it's her. She's the only person I've ever met more pigheaded than he is. Though I do wonder if she's safe being alone with him these days..."

"Yeah, I know. If Harry ever did lose control fully, we probably wouldn't know until he blew something - or someone, worst case - up." She gave a little shudder. "I don't like to think about it."

"Neither do I." Malfoy said, idly running his fingers through Pansy's hair. "But it's one of those things we can't ignore. If he does lose this fight, and I pray he doesn't, I hope it at least happens while we're near this city. I... don't think I'd be around to father any children if I was the one who had to face Potter down."

"Don't talk like that..." Pansy murmured, clutching at Malfoy's shoulder. "And don't make me think of it. He's strong. He won't lose. We won't have to fight him. You won't have to fight him."

"I hope you're right." Malfoy whispered. "...I'm sorry. I think the medication is just messing with my thought process. I didn't mean to bring the tone down this far..."

"It's alright. You never were one to voice your inner thoughts that much, really. It's good to hear what's bottled up in your head every so often. Even if it is morbid..." Pansy said, tilting her head up to kiss Malfoy's cheek. "C'mon. Let's get some rest. Maybe you'll dream about what it's like to change a diaper!"

"Well, thank you, Pansy. You've just assured that I won't want to sleep any time soon." Malfoy scowled. "And I don't change diapers. Manually or with magic."

"What if I was at a friend's or something?" Asked Pansy, smiling. "You'd be all alone with little Viola."

"Or Hydrus." Malfoy stated.

"Yes yes, or Hydrus. You wouldn't let her - or him - sit around in his own filth until I got back, would you?" Pansy asked.

"...I think," Malfoy began, bringing his right hand up to rub the bridge of his nose, "That I need to see about absconding with Malfoy Manor's house elves at some point in the future."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry sighed, leaning back against the wall. This wasn't working. Across the room from him, wand drawn, was Sergei Wagner. Since the invasion attempt, Wagner had been working with Harry nearly around the clock, trying to help him focus his magic better so as not to burn through it so quickly. But anything they tried was ending up in failure. And if there was anything that Harry hated more than Voldemort, it was his own failings.

"This is impossible!" He spat suddenly, sinking to the ground. "We've tried it dozens of ways, but we can't reduce the power! It's too damn much and there's no way to control it! Balthazar can't move that fast and I can't synchronize with it even if he could! This is pointless, Wagner! And it's wasting time that neither of us have at the moment!"

"Calm yourself, Harry." Said Wagner, walking over. "We'll call it quits for now. But we're not going to stop until we work out a solution. Voldemort's already transferred bodies and as best we can tell, he's got himself an army already assembled. There's no point rushing it anymore. We don't get the advantage of numbers anymore. Not where it counts. I probably have a few thousand throughout the miles of tunnels and chambers that comprise my city. But the guards are merely volunteers. If he's got the giants on his side, my men are going to fall by the dozens. We need to focus on getting you to where you can control your magic, Harry. Because nothing but that kind of tight focus is going to ensure us a victory anymore."

"You're asking for precision from a man teetering on the brink of insanity!" Snapped Harry, pushing at the wall to raise to his feet again. "I can't focus on anything anymore! My head's been pounding since that attack! I've barely been able to sleep, and what little rest I do

glean, it's all filled with nightmares! I'm not getting stronger, I'm getting weaker! And the longer this drags out, the weaker I'm going to get! Your men may be able to function without proper sleep, but I can't! If you think you're capable of containing me when I fall over the edge, by all means do so. Unleash me on Riddle's army and I'll tear them down! But you're going to have to be the one to come and kill me afterward! If I turn on any of my friends..."

"You won't." Wagner stated.

"You don't know that!" Yelled Harry, shoving himself away from the wall to get up in Wagner's face. "I could be seconds away from losing all control over my higher thought processes! I could be minutes from being able to tell friend from foe! I could be hours from simply aiming down at the ground and blowing up this entire city and everyone in it! The closer I get, the more I can see the risks. Maybe Albus was right. In the end, it was all too much. Maybe it was a better plan to wait and get stronger and shoot them down as they marched on us! You had to restrain me after I destroyed that giant's head, damn it! Everyone there saw it in my eyes when I turned! I couldn't tell who was who! I would have killed everyone had you not been there to stop me!"

As Harry staggered back, rubbing at the center of his chest and panting heavily, Wagner turned and headed for the door to the training room they had been in. "What would you have me do, Harry? It seems I have trapped my people between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, Voldemort and his men will eventually try to take my city over. On the other, you are nearing your breaking point. Or perhaps you've already passed it and merely have bouts where you can keep the madness at bay. Whatever the case may be, my people are in danger from both him and you now. If I don't try to make you focus, if I don't at least make the attempt, then would I be any better than Albus Dumbledore was? He never gave you the chance you deserved. He held you back and, I think, began to truly believe that waiting was the best idea. I have to try, Harry. For my people, for the safety of all living beings that would cross paths with Voldemort's army, and most of all for you. For helping me defend my city. What would you have me do?"

"Throw me out." Harry croaked, head in one hand. "I'll destroy the camps myself. I'll slaughter any creatures he throws at me. I'll do everything in my power to wait until I'm facing him down to let this insanity take hold of me. Whatever happens, don't let it occur here. It needs to be out there. Away from you, this city, and my friends. I'm too unstable to be allowed to walk freely down here anymore..."

"I can't do that and you know it." Wagner said, his voice quiet. "I won't leave you to suffer through it alone. Trust in yourself, Harry. Don't let this eat away at you. You're stronger than that. You've proven you're stronger than that. Every challenge you've faced, you've come out of so far. Are you telling me that you've lived through all of that just to go mad here?"

"I can't trust in myself." Harry murmured. "You don't know what it's like."

"Don't I? I was quite insane for some time after being resurrected, Harry." Wagner said, looking over his shoulder. "But I overcame it. I forced it down. I dominated it instead of letting it dominate me."

"A buzzing. A constant, loud, buzzing. It's in the back of my head always. Sometimes there are screaming voices alongside it. Sometimes, as I'm passing out from exhaustion, they'll all scream at once. They keep me awake, Wagner. A constant, inescapable din, pounding in my head around the clock. Begging me to just give in. Assuring me that everything will be better if I listen to them. Comforting me when I think I'm at my limit by telling me that once they take over, I'll never have to worry about anything again. I can finally rest." Harry explained, looking up at Wagner with a lost, weary expression on his face. "I'm tired, Wagner. I'm so incredibly tired. Haven't I earned a chance to rest yet?"

Sighing quietly, Wagner turned and walked back over to Harry, placing a hand reassuringly on his shoulder. "You'll have all the time in the world to rest, Harry. There isn't much time left. We'll have to mobilize soon. I know this. I may not like it, but I'm not stupid. We're living on borrowed time now that Voldemort has transferred to a new body. Lucius Malfoy was a strong wizard before the transfer. From what I saw during your fight with him, he's picked up a few new tricks

from having his master firmly implanted somewhere inside of him. If there's any madness you're fighting, it's him, Harry. Once he's gone, you'll be able to rest all you want. I dare say you'll end up sleeping past noon for a few years before you're ready to settle in and hold a normal life."

"A normal life..." Harry laughed weakly. "I'll never have a normal life. Even if I somehow get through this alive and with my sanity intact, I'll still always be Harry Potter. I'll always be famous. Any family I have will be famous BECAUSE of me. I don't want to pass that kind of thing along. It's a terrible thing, living with fame. I'd be happy just... being able to sleep..."

"Doctor Sventon is capable of producing the Dreamless Sleep potion, Harry." Wagner said, softly. "Why not go see him? We can spare a day or two for you to just lay in bed and recuperate."

"It doesn't work, because it isn't the nightmares keeping me awake." Harry said, smiling wanly at Wagner. "Unless he can make the noise in my head die out, I'll stay up through it..."

Wagner searched Harry's tired eyes for a moment before nodding and letting out another sigh. "I understand. My city is at your disposal, Harry. Remember that. If there's anything we can get you to help you reclaim your sanity, no matter how little, let me know. Alright?"

"I will... and I'm sorry for snapping at you." Harry said, pocketing his wands finally. "I'm just... worn out. I've got almost nothing left in me. Pansy told me not long ago that after this is all over, Draco's thinking about travelling awhile. Maybe going somewhere warm. That sounds nice. But for me... I just want to go somewhere quiet. Somewhere I can just sleep for days on end. Not sure how up for that Nym would be, but... just the thought of real peace and quiet again is enough to make me want to fall asleep. And it sucks because I know I can't. The screaming will start up. It always does. I've kept the noise in my head a secret from my friends. I'd appreciate you not bringing it up when they're around. I don't want to make them worry any more than they already are..."

"As you wish. Go on, Harry. Get out of here and at least try to relax." Wagner said, walking with Harry back over to the door, which he opened. "I need to go and see your friend Solieyu anyway."

"Still working to get his senses back?" Harry asked.

"Yes. We're slowly getting there. I know he's been unhappy since regaining his own sanity. But any little bit helps, you understand. It's always hardest on those who were in love, Harry. He may never admit it, but I've seen that look in enough eyes to recognize it easily. He wishes he could get back together with Miss Lovegood. He wishes he weren't a rotting husk reanimated by the Dark Arts. He also knows that it's impossible. In time, he will come to accept his new life, however. When he does, his happiness will at least be capable of returning to him. Whether it will or not will be up to him. For now, all I can do is offer to... rehabilitate him, so to speak." Wagner explained.

"I see... well, that's not depressing in the slightest." Harry muttered.

"Undeath is never happy. But we make of it what we can. If nothing else, I hope our research and development teams eventually come up with a 'cure' for our kind. A way to safely release the soul and return it to wherever it came from. A way to ensure we won't get raised again. A way to let my people rest. At the moment, Harry, your existence parallels our own in many ways. We will all find the rest we seek someday. The important thing is that we fight, tooth and nail, until we can reach it. Overcome your madness and keep moving forward. You'll find what you're after eventually." Wagner said, smiling at Harry before heading up the corridor.

Harry watched him until he was out of sight before slipping his hands into the pockets of his jeans. Turning, he walked the opposite way, his mind blank and yet racing at the same time. It was hard to think deeply on anything anymore. Even when the disembodied voices weren't shrieking, the buzzing was doing everything it could to ensure his thinking got disrupted. Rounding a corner, he quietly mumbled, "Wonder if Boris would be able to help..."

Closing his eyes, he rested his head against the cold, stone wall. And, for a brief moment, his head stopped buzzing. He focused on the silence as best he could when it started to ebb again. As he did, the mental image of a long, narrow hallway, much like Ur'terash's own, popped up. He was running in one direction, a cacophony coming from somewhere behind him. He ran until he felt like his legs would give out on him, not slowing down for an instant. He knew that if he did, the noise would quickly overtake him again.

Eventually, he envisioned a door at the end of the corridor. Reaching out, he quickly threw it open, rushed inside, and slammed it behind him, slumping back against it as the din crashed into it from the other side. Only once he was sure the noise couldn't break the door down did Harry bother looking up to see where he now was.

He had entered a familiar, small room. The only other exit appeared to be through a trapdoor in the center of the floor. Along either side of the room were glass cases filled with countless lockets of varying colors. Moving away from the entrance, Harry smiled. He knew this place. He hadn't made use of it for a very long time, but it looked just the same. Feeling wistful, Harry sat down on the trapdoor, legs crossed. And, letting his eyes slip shut, he felt a long-gone feeling around his neck.

When Harry opened his eyes again, he was back in Ur'terash. But the feeling had carried over from what he had been imagining. Reaching up to his neck, he could only smile bitterly when nothing but his own skin was touched. Slumping to the ground, Harry brought his knees up to his chest, hugging them tightly. The adrenaline from the combat was fully gone now, and he was starting to feel the exhaustion setting back in. His eyes stinging at the corners, he let his head rest again his knees. Without bothering to wipe the moisture away, Harry's eyes slipped shut again.

This time, however, there was no noise to keep him awake.

oOoOoOoOoOo

When Harry's eyes opened next, he was no longer in the hallway. Rather, he was in his quarters within the city. He was extremely

groggy upon waking, and it took a moment for his change in location to set in. Making a confused noise, he began to turn to look at the nearby clock to see what time it was. Just then, however, Tonks spoke from just to his right.

"Almost four days." She murmured gently. "Sleeping like a baby."

Without the need to check the clock, Harry stopped moving and let his eyes close again. Someone must have come across him, asleep in the hallway, and transported him back to his room. He tried to ask something, but his voice didn't seem to want to work. All that came out was a half-asleep sound somewhere between a whimper and a grunt.

"Shh. Go back to sleep if you're still tired." Tonks said, leaning over him and kissing his forehead. "The world isn't going to stop if you sleep some more."

"Riddle." Harry mumbled. The word seemed alien as it left his mouth, as though he had had trouble even forming it.

"Voldemort isn't going anywhere. He wants to fight you. Anything else can wait as far as he's concerned." Tonks replied. "You awake to hear a bit of news, though?"

"Nn." It was the only response she was going to get. He wanted to know, really he did. He just didn't currently have the capacity to vocalize such a thing.

"The twins and Lupin took it upon themselves to start sniping the necromancers in the night. It started the night you apparently fell asleep in the hall and has been going on since. They're out right now, in fact. No, don't move, you won't be any help in your condition. They're doing just fine. They've been moving as a three-man team and they've been leaving craters in their wake. Dunno what the hell they're doing - they've been tight-lipped about their technique - but apparently Fred and George have been dreaming up more than just joke shop stuff. The twins making stuff for war is... really, really frightening, to be honest. With their minds, who knows what they've been doing to those Death Eaters." Tonks said.

Harry snorted, rolling onto his right side. He cast a barely-aware glance at Tonks, who tilted her head for a moment before understanding. Then, with a giggle, she slid down and under the covers as well. Harry shifted slightly to move closer to her.

"Every so often," Tonks whispered, brushing Harry's hair away from his eyes. "I think you should be the one getting held at night. Sweet dreams, Harry. I don't know what you did to make it so you could sleep again... but I'm glad you thought of something."

But Harry, who had barely been awake for the entirety of the conversation, hadn't heard her. Once she had slid her arms around him, pulling him into a position similar to the one she typically slept in, he had drifted off again. Tonks, who had taken to sitting around the room and reading, leaned her head against Harry's, her own eyes finally closing. Neither Doctor Sventon nor Wagner himself had been able to work out why Harry had been asleep in that corridor. The best guess came from Wagner, who had simply stated that perhaps Harry had found a way to take in the quiet once more.

Tonks wasn't quite sure what that meant, as the city was always pretty quiet. But she had been so relieved to see Harry sleeping soundly that she didn't care. Sventon had assured her that he hadn't been poisoned, hexed, or any other foul things. His vital signs had been normal as well. He was just resting, a feat that had been difficult for some time.

Whatever he had done, she was happy he had. Feeling sleep tugging at her consciousness, Tonks let out a little yawn before putting one of her hands over one of Harry's. She would have plenty of time to ask him whenever he finally decided to wake up. For now, it was night and, for the first time in a couple months, it seemed like the both of them would make it through the night safely.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: The calm before the storm, I'm afraid. This is the last bit of fluff you'll be seeing for the rest of the book. And for most of the next. And probably until we're well into the F-Series sequel series.

Soak it in while you can, everyone. This is the final bit of peace before all-out mayhem is going to break out. It's going to roll in next chapter, with the death of a major character or two, and continue all the way to the catastrophic ending of book 7.5. 7.5 because I don't have enough to string it into a full book. Calling it book 8 won't do. It's just the true ending. But it'll be its own story. After all, there's going to be about three or four accepted 'endings' to the R-Series when I finish my Xanatos Roulette. I hope you all hang around to see the true ending, which won't happen until the F-Series' final chapters.

Work that out in your heads for awhile and try to make sense of it.

I know this chapter was a bit shorter than usual. But, editing this after finishing chapter 18, I can safely say the two counterbalance one another. Chapter 18 is almost 56kb. It's LONG for me. It's also the last turning point in the book. It's not a fun chapter. It wasn't fun to write and it probably won't be fun to read. But it needed to be done to push Harry to where he needed to be.

## Chapter 18 – The Last Laugh

Scowling as he rifled through his backpack, Fred Weasley let out a sigh. Glancing across the bedroom at his twin, who was taking inventory on a number of strange-looking devices, he asked, "How many do we have left, George?"

"About ten, looks like." George replied, frowning. "We underestimated how big a force we'd be up against."

"Yeah. Shame we can't easily get back here. Bit far to try and apparate." Fred muttered, pulling another handful of devices out of his pack. "Well, we'll just have to use what we've got handy and make the most of them!"

"Shame these could never sell well in the public market." George said, smiling crookedly. "Some of our best work, these."

"Indeed they are." Fred said, gently setting his handful on the bed next to the others. "Think we'll have any left over for the final rush against Voldemort?"

Snorting, George shrugged. "Hard to say. Depends on how tonight goes. Harry wants to lead an all out charge into the last few camps. Knock Riddle's forces down to just the main encampment and whatever forces he's imported."

The devices, 6-inch black cubes, were what the twins had dubbed 'Needlers.' Each could be set to go off at a certain time. Once the countdown reached zero, the Needlers would open on any side not blocked off. They would then begin shooting multiple volleys of small barbs at high speeds. They had been one of the little war toys the two had brought on their trip when Lupin had asked them to come along with him. Out of the assortment of things they had brought, the Needlers had proved the most effective. At first, they had tried to use them as timed mines of a sort, but that hadn't worked out as effectively as hoped. Rather, they had been used more like a hand grenade would. They would set the timer for a low number, lob them high toward the target, who would inevitably look up to see what was flying at them, and they would go off. Having no ground to keep one

or more sides closed, the Needlers would spring open on all sides and, rotating madly as they fell back to earth, would shoot their contents all over the place. More than one unfortunate Death Eater had taken barbs straight to the eyes.

"Looking better the last few days, Harry." Fred commented, sitting on the edge of the bed and leaning back on his arms. "What do you think happened?"

"No clue." George said, tapping his chin. "Seems odd, for sure. But whatever it was, it's got some color back in him. Seems like he's been revitalized."

"After sleeping that long, he oughta be revitalized." Fred chuckled. "Think our poor little Tonks damn near went bananas from the boredom."

Carefully rounding the last stock of Needlers up, George nodded slowly. "Indeed she has. You know, we really should open a betting pool to see how long it takes before Harry does something that gives her grey hair."

"She'd never admit it. She'd change it back to whatever color she was currently wearing." Fred said. "No evidence!"

"Ah, right you are. Shame, that. Great idea for a new product, though! Something to turn your loved ones' hair grey prematurely!" George said, jabbing the air with a finger. "Just gotta think of a catchy name..."

"Biddy Bites?" Suggested Fred, smirking. "Pensioner Pasties?"

"Latter's a better name, but a tougher gimmick. Could make miniature pasties, I suppose." George said, thoughtfully. Putting the Needlers slowly into his own backpack, he looked up. "How's Moony holding up?"

"Won't open the door yet." Fred said, sighing. "Wonder what his room looks like..."

The full moon had come somewhat unexpectedly. Living underground, Remus Lupin, for the first time in ages, hadn't kept up with the phases of the moon. When Wagner had brought the subject up one night, Lupin had gone into something of a panic. Wagner had assured him that his bedroom could be warded to the nines to ensure the safety of both himself and the teenagers. This had calmed Lupin down slightly, though without the Wolfsbane Potion around to keep him calm, he knew he was in for a rough time of it. At his own request, Lupin's door had had a silencing charm put on it. Fred and George, whose room shared a wall with the werewolf's, had been able to hear him, though only faintly. Those were the nights the two had stayed up, talking strategy.

"Well... keep trying. I'm sure he's just keeping us out to prevent us seeing him looking so run-down, but it isn't like we're going to turn our noses up at him for being rough around the edges right after the full moon." George mumbled, sitting cross-legged on the ground near his pack.

"Trying to say our dear former professor is hung up about his image?" Fred asked, cocking an eyebrow. "Given the robes he used to wear?"

"He's been looking pretty good since Sirius' death." George said. "Probably wants to make sure his friend doesn't tell him on in the afterlife or whatever for refusing to put his money to good use."

"True, true." Fred said. Another sigh, and then, "How long?"

"About four hours." George replied, not bothering to glance at the clock. He had been checking it often enough as is. "This is going to be brilliant."

"Indeed. Shame we can't just round the lot of them up and blow the whole pack of Needlers over them, huh?" Said Fred, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly. "After tonight, we may have to fall back on good, old-fashioned wand work to take our opponents down!"

"A sad thought indeed, brother o' mine!" George agreed. "The two of us, reduced to mere casting... Why, we'll be the same as everyone else!"

"Tragic. Just tragic." Fred exhaled slowly. "But, it does mean we'll be able to get back to our shop. Verity must be enjoying her holiday, though."

"At least someone is." George said. "We may need a holiday from our holiday once all is said and done!"

Fred keeled over backwards fully onto the bed. "For all of our bravado..."

"...Things aren't going as well as planned." George finished, nodding.

"Leon's unexpected return, Harry's descent into madness, assumed traitors in probably all of wizarding Britain, Riddle transferring into Lucius Malfoy before we could get to him..." Fred listed, extending fingers. "We have to finish this soon."

"Worried?" Asked George.

"Not worried, per se. Just anxious." Fred responded after a moment's silence. "I think Harry can hold up long enough to see this through. Dunno what'll happen to the Gauntlet afterwards, though. What's going to happen to Leon once Voldemort's killed, though?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Fred began, sitting back up. "Remember the other night? The last Death Eater had a few undead guys with him when we cornered him. We killed him and they just..."

"Fell down..." George finished, brow creased. "Yeah... you don't think that'll happen to him though, do you?"

"He hasn't fallen over yet. Meaning we haven't killed whoever brought him back. But we're running out of targets pretty quick, George..." Fred murmured, chewing on his lower lip and looking troubled. "They seem to be bound in some way to the one who raised them. Dunno if it's just shoddy necromancy on the Death Eaters' part or what. Does have me concerned, though. Poor guy hasn't been the same, even

after Luna helped him back. Doesn't talk much, doesn't move much. He seems like an old man who knows his time's well passed..."

George got up, moving to sit next to his twin. "You think anyone else has worked it out? About these newly-made guys falling to pieces when their creators die?"

"Not sure..." Fred said. "Harry probably hasn't, but he hasn't really been out there working on it as of late. I don't think we should bring it up, to be honest. You know how he gets. He'd cut himself off and try to find a workaround. We don't have time for that now..."

"Luna's going to be crushed. She has to lose him all over again." George said, his voice going very quiet. "No one deserves that."

Glancing aside, Fred put an arm around his brother's shoulders. George tried to smile, but couldn't quite muster the spirit. Now too pre-occupied thinking about Solieu's inevitable fate, neither of them spoke again. Instead, they sat there, on the edge of the bed, waiting for the clock to count down to the night's raid.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Neck is killing me..." Muttered Ginny darkly. "Honestly, I wish those two would warn us next time..."

Hermione, who had been listening to Ginny rant for somewhere in the realm of half an hour, merely raised her eyebrows. Her attention was focused on the book in her hands. Or rather, that's where she WANTED it to be. She had been stuck on the same page since Ginny had burst in to rant about her twin brothers' grand finale on the previous night's attacks on the Death Eaters' encampments. A rogue Needler had been lobbed blindly and Ginny had gotten the side of her neck sliced open by a stray barb. The twins had immediately been at her side, healing the wound and apologizing profusely, but Ginny was still upset by it. Rightfully so, in Hermione's opinion, but if it had been her, she would have let it go by now.

"You know," Hermione said, interrupting Ginny for the first time, "I think something else is what's really bothering you. I know this isn't

the first time they've inadvertently hurt you with a trick gone wrong. You've said yourself they once accidentally gave you a black eye when one of their inventions bounced up and crashed into your head, right?"

"Jumping Bins." Ginny growled, glowering at the door as though trying to melt it. "...And I guess I am irritated. It just doesn't feel like we're being useful, Hermione. Compared to Harry or Malfoy, the rest of us are..."

"Normal." Hermione said, marking her place in the book and closing it. Setting it aside onto a small table, she continued, "We're normal. But we're in a situation that calls for something to go beyond the norm. I know how you feel, Ginny, I really do. And before you ask, yes, it does frustrate me sometimes. Harry's learned all of these interesting spells and abilities and even if I studied the theories for ages, I doubt I'd be quite as good as him at them. That's just how it is, though. He had to become a monster to take down another monster. As for Malfoy..."

"Malfoy's pretty strong for just being 'normal,' wouldn't you say?" Asked Ginny.

"I would. But I think that's partly Harry's doing, as well. Even now, I don't know if Malfoy's given up on beating Harry in a fight. They spent so long as enemies, they'll probably always be rivals on some level or another." Hermione said, closing her eyes and resting her head back on the chair. "He's pushing himself to his limits to try and catch up to Harry. And to his credit, he's actually gaining ground, bit by bit. But..."

"But...?"

"Well, once Harry gets rid of Voldemort... then what? He said himself that he may have to remove his own arm to prevent the 'infection' of the Gauntlet from spreading to the rest of his body. I can't imagine he'll have anywhere near his current level of strength once that happens. And even if they work out how to safely remove the Gauntlet, that's still removing a lot of his power. I don't know, Ginny... either way, it seems Malfoy's setting himself up for a disappointment.

Harry isn't going to be the same after he fights Voldemort." Hermione explained.

"I don't think any of us will be." Ginny murmured. "...Hermione?"

"Hm?"

"...Do you think we'll be welcomed back? At home, I mean."

Hermione tilted her head slightly. "I'd like to think so. Harry tried his best to reason with Dumbledore in their last meeting. Dumbledore held back. I think, once we go back and prove we've been successful, we'll be welcomed back. Harry won't be on edge anymore. Dumbledore won't have any reason to manipulate him. I think things will mellow over time. It may be a bit rough at first. I'm sure we'll all get chewed out by every adult we know. Especially our own parents. But I think we'll be able to settle back into life. ...That what was really bothering you?"

"I guess so." Ginny said, sighing. "Hate waiting around..."

"Mm, I know what you mean. I wonder what everyone else is doing." Hermione pondered.

"Probably the same as us. Getting antsy from waiting." Ginny said. "Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Is your stomach as twisted in knots as mine?"

"...Yes."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Remus Lupin whimpered quietly as he rolled onto his left side, curling back up into as tight a ball as he could force himself to. God, he hated his transformations without the potion he had grown so accustomed to. Every square inch of him ached fiercely. His bones felt like they hadn't experienced a transformation in years, they were

hurting so badly. Every single, stupid part of himself was crying out in agony and he could do nothing but wait it out. His hair, messy and falling in his face, kept getting in his eyes. And every time he lifted an arm to brush it away again, he ended up groaning.

This sucked. He wanted to be out there helping Harry and the others finish off the last of the camps. He had already missed enough of the combat. He was the only proper adult that had been 'allowed' to go on the ride, and he had been laid up in his room for days. Plus, probably due in part to the fact that the pain was keeping him from thinking clearly, he had seemed to develop some kind of temporary idiocy. A part of him, every so often, would forget that he was hurting from head to toe, and he would try to change positions in his bed. This would, inevitably, cause him to let out a pained cry. That, in hurt, would lead to the quiet whimpering, as his vocal chords were also quiet stressed at the moment.

At least it was dark in the room. He didn't think he could handle any light at the moment. And it was still too soon after the full moon - he could still see pretty well in the darkness. The vision and hearing were always the last to return to whatever passed as normalcy for him. It had been quite the useful trick back in his Hogwarts days. He would be the navigator for James and Sirius as they snuck around the castle under the invisibility cloak. His enhanced senses gave his friends a few methods of detecting other people early.

The worst part, at least at the moment, was how he missed doing the little things. For instance, at that particular moment, the middle finger on his right hand kept feeling strange any time he tried flexing it. He knew that feeling meant it needed to be popped. He had developed that little bad habit during his early days at Hogwarts, before he had made any friends. He popped his fingers out of nervousness and it had simply stuck with him. But he knew that if he even attempted to pop it, in any manner, he would pay dearly. But the feeling being there, unanswered, was driving him up the wall.

He knew what had to be done. He didn't like it, but he knew it had to be done. With an irritated grunt, he slowly moved his right thumb to the right side of the middle finger that needed to be popped. Then, gritting his teeth, he pushed his thumb up while trying to move his

finger down. Nothing. Well, nothing but the extreme pain caused by moving, in any case. When the wave of pain died down, he tried again. But it still wouldn't pop. A disgruntled growl escaped his throat as he glared at his hand. He hated when it took multiple tries. Finally, on the fifth attempt, his fingers lined up just the right way and the middle knuckle of the finger popped.

The fresh wave of pain, like needles piercing every inch of his hand, was countered by the feeling of his finger finally accepting what he had wanted to do. Letting his hand gently land back on the bed, Lupin closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. One finger down, many more to go. But they, he decided, not paying attention to his back aching from being curled up for so long, would have to wait.

oOoOoOoOoOo

"Wish you didn't have to go." Solieyu murmured, leaning against the wall near the door.

Luna looked up from her bed, smiling pleasantly. "Tonight will be safer than the last couple of nights were. You know that."

"Doesn't matter. Don't like you fighting." Solieyu gruffed, glancing away.

Giggling quietly, Luna got to her feet. "When did you get so protective of me, anyway?"

"I've had a lot of time to think. Both in the afterlife and while trying to get some feeling back into my body." Solieyu said, frowning and bringing a hand up to rub his throat. Talking was getting slightly easier, but his neck still had a dull ache in it somewhere. "The sooner Harry ends this, the better."

Luna's smile faltered at this. It was something that Solieyu hadn't missed.

"Once Harry ends this," She began, "I'll have to go back to Britain..."

Solieyu closed his eyes and nodded slowly. "Yeah. It's for the better, though. You may not think so. But I do. I wish I could still hold you, Luna. I wish I could feel your warmth. But even if I could, I'm still... THIS!" He let out a frustrated scowl and crossed his arms. "I'm a rotting, reanimated corpse. I don't want anyone to even see me like this, let alone accept me and want to be around me."

"I love you. Not your body." Luna murmured, eyes downcast.

"I know that." Solieyu said, shaking his head. "That isn't the point, Luna. I should still be dead. I went out doing something I wanted. Even though I lost, I went out the way I wanted. I was... happy, afterward. If that makes any sense. The bloodlust had finally left. I was with family members I hadn't seen since I was a little boy. Even then, though... I couldn't forget you. I worried constantly. Do you know what finally got me to stop?"

"What?" Asked Luna, finally looking back up.

"My grandfather hitting me upside the head." Solieyu said, a ghost of a smile on his face. "He told me, 'Women are made of tougher stuff than us.' I knew he was talking about my grandmother. She never cried at his funeral. Said that if he was watching her, she didn't want to make him sad. He also said that, eventually, we would meet again."

"And we did." Luna said.

"Just not in the way either of us had hoped. Luna? Will... you promise me something? Ever since I regained my thoughts, it's been bothering me..." Solieyu said.

"What is it?"

"Promise me... no matter what... you'll live your life. Don't worry about me. Don't be single forever. And don't do anything dangerous. Dr. Sventon will help find a cure. The two of us will meet again, someday. I hope I'll be there, waiting for you. I don't want to see you there for a long time, though. I want you to lead a full, happy life. Understand?"

"And if I get there before you do?" Luna asked.

"If you get there before I do, don't give up on me. I'll find you again. Eventually." Solieu said.

Luna closed her eyes as tightly as she could, feeling them starting to sting. "I hate this..."

"So do I." Solieu whispered, walking over and putting his hands on her shoulders. And, seeing her shake instead of feeling it, he closed his eyes as well. "I'll be there first. I promise I will. It's scary when you first arrive. You're all alone and you don't know where you are or where to go. I promise you I'll be there first so you won't have to go through that. I don't care if I have to wait by myself for decades. When you show up, I'll be waiting."

Pushing herself forward and against Solieu, Luna clutched at his robes as she sobbed. Solieu's eyes squeezed tighter. He wasn't capable of crying anymore, though there was a hitching feeling in his chest. Letting his arms close in around Luna, he held onto her as tightly as he could.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Harry raised his glass over the small table he had conjured in his bedroom. "Here's to the start of the end." He said. "Tonight, we crush the last of his camps. Then all that's left is Voldemort himself. We've come this far. We won't be slowed down by a few giants or manticores. We won't let the remaining Death Eaters get between us and victory. And I damn sure won't let Voldemort leave his own camp alive. He's going to rot in the Void for all of eternity."

Tonks, Malfoy, and Pansy all raised their own glasses, clinking them against Harry's. There wasn't anything but warm butterbeer in the glasses, but it still helped to invigorate the group, who had assembled with just an hour left until they would be going out and laying siege to the handful of remaining camps. Three teams going to three separate camps. Harry was planning to go with Fred and George to see what the hell they had been doing to the other camps. They wouldn't tell him anything and his curiosity was getting the better of him. Malfoy

would be taking Tonks and Pansy to go for another. That left Hermione, Ginny, and Luna to take down the last one. Harry was a bit worried about them, but Malfoy assured him that with Ginny there, they'd be fine. This made Harry question him, but Malfoy wasn't speaking. Apparently Ginny was irritated with the twins and had been using that to focus her magic or something. He wasn't sure he wanted to press it with her.

"How long are you thinking we'll wait after tonight?" Asked Malfoy, swirling his butterbeer as though it were a fine wine. "Will we be attacking Voldemort tomorrow?"

"If at all possible. Keep his breathing room to a minimum and whatnot." Harry said. "Got an ace up my sleeve for that. Something I forgot I brought with me. Balthazar was kind enough to remind me."

"Wouldn't happen to be a few armies, would it?" Asked Tonks, dryly.

"Yeah, that'd be nice." Pansy agreed. "We could use the backup."

"Wagner will be there with us. He won't be anywhere near full power, since Voldemort's camp is too far from the city. But he'll be there. I know a good supply of the soldiers here will be joining us, even if I asked them not to. I understand their conviction and dedication to him and this place, but..." Harry began. Blowing out a sigh, he muttered, "I just hope I don't accidentally get any of them. Once I see Voldemort, I'm fighting my way to him. I don't care what gets in my way."

"We'll try our best to plow the road for you." Tonks said, smirking.

"It's been blocked for far too long." Harry responded, staring down at his drink. "We're finally going to clear it. Then we can go home and rest."

Taking a slow, deep breath in, Harry pushed back in his chair and got to his feet, his drink slamming on the table. "Draco, we're going early. Get the others. I'll inform Wagner. Meet up at the northeastern exit off of the throne room."

"Closing in's making you antsy." Malfoy said, standing as well. "Can't say as I blame you, of course. Do promise me something for tomorrow, Potter."

"What's that?" Asked Harry.

"As Voldemort is currently occupying my father, and as I apparently am not in the same league anymore - something I assure you I'm furious over - I want you to torture him as much as possible. Chances permitting, of course." Malfoy said, a fire in his eyes. Speaking through gritted teeth, he continued, "Just because Voldemort's going to be thrown into whatever this Void place is doesn't mean you can't have a little fun first. I want my father to suffer, Potter. And if I can't do it, then you will."

"Roger that." Said Harry, stepping past the table and sweeping out of the room, his Ouroboros cloak billowing as he left. "Let's move."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

It was a very still night out, something Harry was trying not to pay any notice to. It was cloudy though, which made for poorer visibility. And the less that the Death Eaters could see, the better. Naturally, he assumed at least a few would have spelled themselves to see better in the dark, but he wasn't positive. From what he had seen, they relied more on large fires to illuminate the outside parts. Inside the magical tents, where the experiments were performed, it was sure to be bright.

"Hey," Harry whispered as the twins knelt down on either side of him. They were a fair distance back from the camp and positioned so the uncontrollable undead shackled as guards wouldn't be able to catch their scent should a wind start to rise. "What happens if you were to collapse a wizarding tent while the occupants were still inside? Would they be crushed or would they do whatever the hell the furniture does?"

"Good question." Fred murmured in response. "We'll have to test it out sometime."

"So, Harry, what're our plans? We gonna have a bit of fun with 'em or are we being straightforward tonight?" Asked George.

"I can feel the madness in the back of my mind. It wants to go in, wands firing, and just lay waste to everything that moves. I'm trying to squash that feeling. I'd rather pick off an area of the undead and slip unnoticed to the edge of their wards. The more we can take down from the shadows, the better off we'll be. Maybe I'm just nervous because I've been out of action for a little while, but something's got me on-edge about this." Harry whispered. "If anything unexpected should happen - a giant or something comes rumbling in - find me and stick close. I'll want to keep tabs on you. Alright?"

"You act like we couldn't take a giant." George said.

"We're crushed, Harry!" Fred agreed.

"Better me crushing you than the giant." Harry said, eyes narrowing as he aimed one of his wands towards a small pack of skeletal figures.

"We'll be mindful of our surroundings." George assured him. "We know when to be serious, believe it or not."

"You just keep yourself under control, yeah?" Fred said. "That madness in the back of your head - make sure it stays back there. Keep a cool head."

"I'll do my best. If I start to act a bit unlike myself, though..." Harry trailed off.

"We'll stun you and handle things ourselves." Fred stated. "...C'mon. If we keep chatting all night, the others will set off the alarms at their camps and give our boys a head's up."

Harry took careful aim and let fly a dark burst of magic. Darting between a pair of trees, it struck one of the undead men in the head, causing his skull to crack and crumble apart. A few seconds later, the body collapsed in on itself. Next to him, another pair of undead men turned and stared down at the pitiful pile on the ground, their rotting

brains unable to work out what had happened. Seconds later, another couple of shots came from the darkness, striking the pair of them down, as well.

Silently, Harry motioned for the twins to following him. And, hunched over and moving slowly, the trio made their way up closer to the camp. Theirs had five tents, each housing two or three Death Eaters. At least a dozen undead men and women were chained to trees on the perimeter of the wards that would alert the Death Eaters to any intruders. And while neither Harry nor the Weasleys could physically see the wards, they had a general idea of where they were, simply from dealing with other encampments so far.

Thankfully, whoever was running this group apparently hadn't been too bright. The undead were chained up in bunches of three, one to each primary direction. Harry's group had just broken down the western trio. A few trees and a tent were all that separated them from being in the camp itself. The five tents were positioned in a circle around the large, roaring campfire that was illuminating the forest. Only two Death Eaters were sitting out by it, though occasionally another would come up from one of the tents for a few minutes before ducking back in.

"Think your toys can take care of them?" Harry asked, his voice barely audible.

"Of course. Gonna cause a lot of noise once they fire, though." George whispered back. "Change of heart, Harry?"

"We should've heard an alarm from one of the other camps by now." Harry hissed. "Draco's group at the very least should have breached their camp."

Reaching into one of his pockets, Fred pulled out a pair of Needlers. "Where do you want them to come in from?" He asked.

"Overhead. Best if they don't know the direction they came from. If possible, make them drop on the other side of them to throw the others off." Harry whispered.

Fred nodded, poking the cubes on one side with his wand before levitating them high into the air. Staring up at them, he whispered, "You know once these go through the wards..."

"Yeah. You're gonna have to be quick about it." Harry muttered.

Licking his lips, Fred jerked his wand forward, causing the Needlers to go soaring east, through the wards, and just over the two guards by the fire. The second they passed the wards, an ungodly loud siren began to sound throughout the area. The Death Eaters by the fire were on their feet at once, scanning the surrounding area for anyone who would dare to try and attack them. Harry and the twins stayed hidden, with Fred suddenly twisting his wand.

The Needlers came falling to the ground with a soft THUD. The Death Eaters were quick to turn and aim down at them. The boxes twitched, their sides flew open, and they began spraying their barbs in all directions. Almost immediately, the Death Eaters began to cry out in pain as the barbs pierced their robes. At the same time, more Death Eaters began to spill out of the tents, in turn getting peppered with the Needlers' deadly contents.

"Take the stragglers out!" Harry ordered, pushing himself up and aiming both wands in. The twins did the same, taking aim at anyone who was screaming and writhing around, attempting to pull barbs off of themselves. Harry, on the other hand, was picking off Death Eaters who had missed the Needlers' handiwork. It was almost hypnotic, in a way, the way the Death Eaters in the tents would come out to ask what the hell was going on, only to get brought down. It reminded him of stories the twins had told him about the gnomes in their garden back at home.

A few minutes passed, and no one else came out of the tents. The alarm was still echoing through the area, much to Harry's irritation. Tapping the twins on their arms, he motioned for them to follow him into the camp. When he got to the front of the tent nearest where they had entered, he sent a large spout of flame in through the flap. Hearing no screams, he nodded at the twins, who went off to follow his lead.

The mindless undead, who had been going crazy since the alarm had sounded, finally went silent as they slumped over, unmoving. And, shortly thereafter, the siren died off. The three stood near the fire, still glancing around themselves occasionally to ensure they weren't being snuck up on. And, off in the distance, another siren began to cry.

"Good noise." Fred grunted, walking over and kneeling next to the used Needlers. "Guess they were just waiting for us to move first or something. Tsk, damn. Twenty or so still in here... gotta figure out how to perfect these. Damn useful..."

"Now I really don't like this." Harry said, looking around nervously.

"Too easy?" George asked.

"Far too easy." Harry said. "Were the rest this easy?"

"Pretty much. You'd think they'd up their defenses after we wiped out most of their buddies' camps. No telling how Death Eaters' minds work, though." Fred said. "So... what now, Harry? We gonna hang back and wait for the others here, or do you wanna go check in on them?"

"Well," Harry began, turning and looking into the woods in the general direction the new siren was coming from. "I think--"

"Look out!" George suddenly shouted, grabbing Harry's robes and jerking him to one side just as a green beam of magic came flying into the camp.

Harry landed with a wince on his side, scrambling quickly to his feet and aiming his wands into the darkness. "Where'd it come from?!"

"Off to the north!" George said. "Fred, you see anything out there?"

"Not a damn thing!" Fred replied, moving in closer. "Definitely a wizard, though!"

Narrowing his eyes, Harry snarled, "I'm really getting tired of people taking potshots at me!" And, with a downward swing of his wands, large fireballs shot into the woods, setting the trees ablaze. But the newfound light sources did little to illuminate the source of the attack. "You two got anything that might be useful?"

"Without knowing where our lovely attackers are, the Needlers are useless. Don't have anything by way of light, either." George stated, turning and looking off to the west again. "Looked strong, that spell."

"Yeah, doesn't exactly give me hope we're dealing with one that got away." Harry growled. "Don't like this at all."

"No cannon fodder, then." Fred murmured, smirking faintly. "Damn, and here I thought we were going to have an easy time of it for once."

"Since when has anything involving me been easy?" Asked Harry. After a few more minutes of inactivity, he put a wand to his throat. And, his voice magically amplified, he called out, "Show yourself! If you want to try and kill me, do it to my damned face and stop skulking around the darkness like a rat!"

"A rat?" Came a quiet voice from one side. Harry's eyes narrowed further when he heard it. "But Harry... that's exactly what I am..."

"Haven't been fed to the rotting corpses yet, I see. And, as usual, it seems you're too scared to fight by yourself. What brings you out here tonight, Wormtail?" Harry spat, turning to face Peter Pettigrew, who stood near a dozen taller Death Eaters, all of who were aiming their wands in at Harry and the twins.

"My Master orders, and I obey." Pettigrew said. His voice seemed strangely confident, something Harry didn't like one little bit. "Rest assured, Harry, there are others, each providing backup to the other remaining camps. Unfortunately, it seems we got here too late to keep the new recruits from being slaughtered."

"Seem pretty sure of yourself, Wormtail." Harry said, wands at the ready.

"After a certain point..." Pettigrew began, his sunken eyes focusing in on Harry. "One gets used to their place in life. My Lord has been so generous as to... help me... with my problems, shall we say. A great honor, given how badly I performed his resurrection."

"Still an idiot, I see." Harry laughed. At Pettigrew's confused look, he continued, "He's trying to earn my favor. I know exactly what this is!"

"What are you talking about?" Demanded Pettigrew.

"Riddle and I had a bit of a talk when he came to visit Wagner. He knows that he isn't the only thing I've been fighting. He doped you up on whatever spells or potions he could spare to up your courage, else you would've never come to face me. Not knowing what I'm capable of! He's getting rid of you and letting me be the one to do the disposing! He wants me to give in to the madness and butcher you, Wormtail. And I'm finding it hard to resist such a tempting present!" Harry purred, his shoulders hunching slightly.

At this, Fred made an almost unnoticeable motion with his wand. On the other side of Harry, George did the same. Harry fell over backwards, his body rigid, the wild-eyed, predatory expression frozen on his face. As he clattered to the ground, Pettigrew asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Fulfilling a promise." George said, setting his bag down on the ground and kneeling.

Across from him, Fred was doing the same thing. "Gotta keep Harry under control, see. If ol' Voldemalfoy is baiting him with you just to try and invoke his lunacy, we've gotta make sure Harry keeps out of it."

"I'm sure he'd love nothing more than to blow you up into little bitty pieces..." George continued, pulling out a pair of Needlers.

"We might not be as familiar with the situation, but we still despise you as well, see." Fred added, standing and holding another pair of Needlers. "You tainted the good Marauder name and screwed Sirius over on more than one occasion."

"We liked Sirius." George added, his voice growing dark. "I'm just sad Moony can't be here to help us."

"An unfortunate occurrence beyond our control." Fred said, nodding slowly. "But I'm sure he'll be glad to know that we've managed to snap a trap around a certain rat's neck, nonetheless."

"Even more so if we bring the rat's body back so he can finish it off in whatever way he deems fit." George laughed, an odd-sounding noise.

"Providing, of course, that there's enough of you left to bring back." Fred spat.

"Fred, old chap, it appears we're outnumbered." George said, his voice suddenly jovial again.

"Indeed it does!" Fred said, his tone matching his twin's. "But the more the merrier, I always say! It's more fun when we get some good splash damage going!"

"Death Eater dominoes!" George exclaimed, arms out to his sides. Then, in a slightly more somber tone, he asked, "Harry won't stay down long. Think we can do this in time?"

"I think we're about to find out." Fred said. And, giving his brother a quick glance and nod, the two launched themselves at Pettigrew and his group of Death Eaters.

On the ground, frozen in place, Harry heard every word of the twins' conversation and saw them leave his field of vision. He was struggling to break the body-bind, to the point where he went to see Balthazar to ask him to start opening locks. Balthazar had already opened the first of the two, but was trying to prevent Harry from making him release the second.

"Listen, Harry!" He argued. "They sound like they're doing fine!"

"I don't care!" Harry roared. "I have to help them! Open the second lock!"

"Harry!"

"Open the bloody lock!" Harry screamed, storming up to Balthazar and grabbing him forcefully. "You are little more for a tool that I use to control the flow of my magic, do you hear me?! My friends could get themselves killed out there! I can maintain control, damn it, so just OPEN THE SECOND LOCK ALREADY!"

"You're letting the madness get to you already!" Balthazar shouted, shoving Harry away from him. "You're going to end up hurting yourself by trying to force yourself out of it! Whatever the hell they hit you with, it's not an average binding spell! What good will you be to them if you only have a few seconds to act after getting free?!"

"I'd rather risk it and have those few seconds! Open the second lock, Balthazar, or I swear on Merlin's grave, I will destroy this entire clock tower and do it myself!"

"Do that and the madness really will engulf you!" Balthazar yelled. "Think, damn it!"

"I am thinking!" Harry shot back. "I'm thinking that it was a mistake to ever fuse with this bloody thing! It's done nothing but attract bad luck like a magnet! But I've come this far. I've lost too many people already! I won't lose any more! Now OPEN THE GOD DAMN LOCK!"

Eyes narrowing in rage, Balthazar stormed across the room and slammed his hands into the large gear that held the second burst of wild magic in place. Giving a venom-filled glance over his shoulder, he growled, "Then let whatever happens after be on your head."

His magic suddenly giving him a jolt, he tried to focus it on countering whatever Fred and George had stunned him with. And, far too slowly for Harry's liking, he managed to eat it away until he had regained control. It had been a strain, though. But Balthazar be damned, he had to help the twins! His vision blurring for a brief moment as he shakily got to his feet, he saw that Pettigrew and most of the Death Eaters were still on their feet. Fred and George were tossing little boxes and spheres and all other manner of objects at the remaining group, each producing a different effect. But the Death Eaters

Pettigrew had come with were far more competent than the grunts that Harry and the twins had just taken down. They could hold their own in a fight.

"Get away from them!" Harry barked. "I'll finish this!"

"The hell you will!" The twins replied, backing up toward him and shielding themselves from the onslaught of spells that Pettigrew and his men were firing their way.

"We put you out for a reason!" Fred shouted.

"You're the only one who can fight this! You're going to get Voldemort tomorrow!" George growled.

"You can't be laid up here!" Stated Fred, looking quickly over his shoulder at Harry.

Doing the same, George added, "Seal the locks back up! We know what we're doing!"

"You can't handle them on your own!" Harry argued. "If you'd just..."

"Let you help? Look at you, Harry! Just breaking out of our stun has worn you out!" George said, catching a chance to fire back a few quick spells before being forced on the defensive again.

"I could've taken them down in a few seconds, damn it!" Harry yelled.

"You would've also been stuck in bed for a week!" Fred said, wincing as he was pushed back.

"Better me being in bed and delaying the attack than you two getting injured!" Harry exclaimed.

"We're unimportant, you bloody idiot!" George snapped. "No one's going to be safe again if you don't hurry and kill Voldemort and end this! We can handle these guys!"

"We knew this day was coming!" Fred added. "We're all set to use that if we have to!"

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Harry asked, desperation leaking into his voice. His time was almost up. If he didn't act soon... "Move aside and let me kill them! I promise I won't waste my magic! I won't wind up hospitalized!"

"The problem is..." Fred began.

"That your hero business..." George continued.

"Has always made you a bit tasty!" They finished in unison.

"You're too stubborn to realize..." Fred went on.

"That the rest of us want to fight, too!" George finished.

"We can't be as strong as you. We can't be the ones to kill Voldemort. But I'll be damned if we don't give everything we have to ensuring you have the easiest time you can when you do stare him down!" Fred shouted.

Just then, a bright red burst of light shattered Fred's shield, pierced his left shoulder, and sent him spinning to the ground next to Harry.

"Fred!" Cried both Harry and George, the latter of which quickly rushed to the side and ducked to shield his fallen brother. Harry aimed his own wands forward and added to George's shield spell.

Spitting out a fair amount of blood, Fred grinned through red, stained teeth as he got back to his feet. "No worries! Had worse inventing things for the shop!"

"Liar!" Harry snarled. "George, take him and get out of here! I'll kill Wormtail and his lackeys and catch up!"

Fred and George glanced at once another, then at Harry, who was visibly wobbling as spell after spell crashed into his and George's shields. And, nodding at the same time, the two moved to stand on

either side of Harry once more, Fred raising another shield and George strengthening his own.

"Harry..." Fred said, his voice unusually quiet.

"Do us a favor..." George murmured.

Harry listened, but didn't reply. His vision was getting too blurry. He could barely make out the dark forms of the Death Eaters against the blackness of the trees. He was concentrating on keeping his shield spells up.

"Tell Gin we're sorry." Fred said, putting a hand on Harry's back.

"Tell the others not to be sad." George added.

"Don't!" Harry suddenly growled, his legs buckling under him. "Don't you dare start talking like that, damn it!"

Wormtail roared something then, and all of the Death Eaters across the camp fired as one, their collective spells breaking through even Harry's shield, which had been wavering just as much as he had been. Harry and the twins were thrown to the ground, with Harry feeling as though all the air in his lungs had been blasted right out of him. Clawing at the dirt to get back up, he saw Fred and George rise on either side of him, slouching slightly. Fred was clutching at his injured shoulder.

"You won't kill Harry." George panted

"Not as long as we're alive." Fred said, his breathing coming in short bursts.

"And unfortunately for you, Weasleys are damn hard to kill!"

"Quite a shame for you lot, it just isn't Harry's day to go!" Fred chimed, raising his wand.

"Fred, m'lad, I do believe it's time!" George crowed, giving his brother a thumbs-up.

"I daresay you're right!" Fred agreed.

"We're clearly getting nowhere, sitting here getting hammered by their spells!"

"And Harry's damn near about to pass out on us again!"

"He'd be in trouble if we left any of them alive." George said, his voice turning deadly.

"What we need to do is make sure that when we go down..." Fred started, the change in his voice echoing that of his brother's. "...We drag them along with us the entire way."

Harry didn't like where this was going at all. Up to the end, their tones had been as cheerful as they ever were. But now, looking up at them, Harry could see the maniacal grins spread across their faces, a manic glint in their eyes. And then, suddenly, the two turned and looked down at Harry once more, their expressions softening to reveal genuine smiles. It lasted for only a brief moment, but the image of their smile remained burned into Harry's mind, even as they turned back at Pettigrew's group, the crazed looks returning. Wands aimed forward, the twins shot toward the Death Eaters, roaring out something in unison that was lost as a sudden, howling wind kicked up from seemingly out of nowhere.

Harry tried to force himself to stand, but only succeeded in toppling forward. Pushing himself up, he only saw the twins for a split second as they, and the Death Eaters, were engulled in a blisteringly bright flare of white light. The wind had ceased, the air now being filled with what could only be called victorious laughter. The light was expanding out toward him, stopping just before he was swallowed by it, as well. Reaching out a shaking hand, the tips of his fingers collided with the light as though it was a solid object. But Death Eaters, one by one, were coming shooting out of it, sent flying back into and through trees surrounding the camp site. As the light grew brighter, so too did the laughs grow louder. And, somewhere beyond the insane laughter, Harry could just make out the sound of people shrieking violently.

And then the light was simply gone and all went deathly silent. The light did not fade, it did not burn out, it simply ceased to exist. The Weasley twins were standing oddly over the mangled corpses of Wormtail and the Death Eaters that hadn't been sent flying. Harry started to push himself back up to his feet, a rush of relief washing over him. He was very unstable as he stood, his balance feeling completely thrown off. Looking up at Fred and George, he took a wobbling step toward them.

As he did, the twins began to fall over backwards. Harry's eyes went wide as they hit the ground, smoke pouring from their eyes and mouths, as though a fire had been ignited somewhere within their heads. They didn't blink, they didn't move, and their faces were frozen in triumphant grins.

His legs giving out at the sight, Harry crumpled to the ground again, staring at the twins' bodies, trying to will them to move, to speak, to do something to let him know that they were alright. But it never came. They never moved. And the smoke never stopped rising from their faces, dissipating into the night.

Hands balling into fists, Harry punched the ground as hard as he could, ignoring the searing pain coming from his knuckles as they were sliced open on some of the many sharp rocks that littered the camp. He was vaguely aware that the third alarm had sounded at some point and was now the only one still going. It was going on far too long. Teeth gritting as his eyes began stinging, Harry hissed, "Balthazar?"

"...Yes, Harry?"

oOoOoOoOoOo

"Duck!" Luna cried, flattening herself against the ground as the Killing Curse flew at her. It collided harmlessly with the mausoleum that was behind her. "Hermione, to your right!"

Hermione let out a surprised cry as a cutting hex came out of seemingly nowhere. Unable to move completely out of its path, she

once more let out a cry as it sliced into the side of her abdomen. Dropping to one knee, she clutched at her side as Ginny moved closer to help guard her until she could recover.

Luna, who was some distance away from the other two, began firing blindly into the woods where the attack had come from. And, as soon as she could, she scrambled over toward the other two, shield spell at the ready. They had been ambushed not long after they had cleared the camp of its original cache of Death Eaters. A tall man with a booming voice had kindly informed them that they wouldn't be leaving the camp and that, if they were lucky, they would be brought back through the Dark Lord's necromancy.

They hadn't been having much luck bringing the men down since that had occurred. Only two of the ten had fallen so far, and that had taken a great deal of combined effort from the three girls. As Luna knelt by Hermione's side, she murmured, "Lift your shirt!"

Hermione did as she was asked, letting Luna look at the spot she had been struck. Luna moved her wand near the cut, which had carved into the bushy-haired girl a good bit, and began uttering a series of incantations. She was no mediwitch, but she could at least help close the wound and deaden the pain so Hermione would be able to think clearly.

"There!" Luna said finally. "How is it?"

"Better." Hermione groaned, pushing herself back up. "We're going to have to fall back soon, Ginny. We can't keep this up..."

"Damn it..." Spat the redhead. "We're going to be the only ones who couldn't take care of ourselves!"

"You don't know that!" Hermione cried.

"Harry certainly isn't going to fail!" Ginny yelled, turning and shooting a cutting hex of her own at a Death Eater who had been dumb enough to try and rush them. It sliced into and through his mask, causing him to drop to the ground, clutching at his face. "And Malfoy's

strong enough that I'm sure he could handle this many without much backup!"

"This isn't the time to be proving yourself!" Luna said, putting a hand on Ginny's shoulder.

"I know that, dammit all, I just--"

But whatever Ginny had been planning on saying, she was cut off by a loud, unearthly howl that came from somewhere to the north. For a moment, no one on either side of the fight moved. The Death Eaters were the first to recover, and started launching spells toward the girls, who raised shield spells and ducked down to try and improve their odds a bit. As the spells bounced off the shields, Ginny asked, "What the hell was that?!"

"I don't know!" Hermione said, sounding nervous. "Oh god, I hope they didn't bring werewolves in, too..."

"Do you think it might be Lupin?" Ginny asked.

"Not a full moon tonight!" Luna said.

Just then, a flash of red light caught all three of them off-guard. It shot around them and into one of the Death Eaters who was trying to hide behind a small building. It pierced through his midsection and lifted straight up into the air with him, blood spraying from the wound all the while. As the Death Eater screamed, the light quickly encased him. And, after just a moment, a series of loud, sickening cracking noises went off all at once. The light dropped the Death Eater then, and the man fell into a lifeless heap as he slammed back to earth, his limbs pointing in odd directions.

Another eerie howl filled the air as the light split into multiple versions of itself, launching directly toward every Death Eater still on his feet. Most of them were impaled like the first and dragged off into the woods. But one of them, the tall leader of the group, had managed to get out of the light's way before it could pierce his body in any way.

The light shifted then, forming into a sphere for a brief moment before it changed into a vaguely humanoid shape. Dropping to the ground, the figure quickly rose to its feet and bolted forward toward the Death Eater, who clearly hadn't been expecting something of that nature. And though the Death Eater shot right at the creature, it simply altered itself so the spells never connected with it. When it got up to the Death Eater, it brought one clawed hand back and shot it forward again at lightning speed. The man let out a strange gurgling noise and an odd lump had appeared under the back of his robes.

At almost the same time, from different points around the camp, the other Death Eaters were letting out horrified screams as they were killed off by the red light. And, moments later, the separated bits converged back on the humanoid creature, merging back into it. Once they had, the creature pulled its claw back through the Death Eater's body, which slumped lifelessly to the ground. It then turned its head toward the trio of girls, who were slowly trying to backpedal out of the camp before they caught its attention.

The creature walked toward them slowly, its featureless face jerking from one direction to another every few seconds. As it got closer, and the three aimed their wands at it, it changed shape once more. It expanded, growing to look more human and less unearthly. Then the color bled away, leaving the creature an almost snow white color. Green eyes and an equally green mouth formed in the face.

"...Harry?" Hermione whispered, bringing a hand up to her mouth.

The Patronus Armor seemed to shoot backwards off of Harry as though banished. His entire face was bloodied and his robes were practically shredded. He looked almost frail as he took another step toward them. His own eyes finally opening, he looked straight at Ginny. He opened his mouth to try speaking, but no words came out. Then, almost as if something had landed on him, Harry dropped to the ground, vomiting up blood and coughing violently. When it passed, he remained on all fours, swaying from one side to the other, his hair noticeably light grey now.

"Harry, what's wrong?!" Ginny asked, rushing toward Harry and dropping to her knees next to him. Hermione and Luna followed suit,

helping Ginny move Harry away from the blood he had coughed up and to get him over onto his back. His body was twitching every so often, and at such a close distance, how badly injured he was became quite apparent.

Again, Harry tried speaking, but he just managed to cough up more blood onto himself, letting out a sickly groan afterward. His eyes found Ginny's once more and he tried to make her understand; tried to get her to know what he was thinking. He needed to tell her that he had tried to save them. He needed to know that she wasn't going to hate him for failing to protect them. He needed to tell her what had happened.

But the words never came. The tears came and flowed freely, but the words never did. He saw Ginny's face visibly pale, and he thought he heard her asking him something. He thought he felt her shaking him and yelling. But her voice was getting very far away now, and she was growing blurry to him. He was so tired. All he wanted to do was rest. He had pushed himself beyond his limits to ensure that no one else was lost. He had used too much of his power. He couldn't hear Balthazar's voice anymore, and the Gauntlet felt heavy on his arm.

Somewhere in the distance, he could only just make out Ginny's panicked screaming. Three more figures had appeared, though they were little more than formless blobs to Harry. Straining his voice, he managed to somehow get out his apology. Though whether anyone had heard or not was unknown to him. With a shudder, Harry's body went limp. And, as he fell into the warm, inviting darkness, only one thought passed through his head.

He would finally get to see Sirius again.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: Fred and George's deaths were something that had been planned since long before canon book 7 was released. I've had their death scene, which was basically a handful of small parts that needed joining together, around since sometime in 2006, if my computer's handling of dates is any indication. Granted, I had to

change things around to fit the scenario and slightly alter the dialogue. But most of it remained.

So what happened at the end? I guess you'll just have to wait until the next chapter. We're officially into the final part of the seventh book now, everyone. Only a handful of chapters remain.

## Chapter 19 – Fury

"Are you going to be alright?" Asked Hermione as she and Ginny walked up the small path. Behind them, an expressionless Remus Lupin was floating a pair of regal-looking boxes.

"No." Ginny said, her voice quiet. "But she'll know by now anyway. The clock, remember?"

"Oh. Right." Hermione said, biting at her lower lip. Glancing aside at Ginny, she reached over to put a hand on the girl's back.

"Thanks for coming with me." Ginny whispered. "Both of you."

"Of course." Hermione said.

Lupin, however, said nothing. His eyes were blank and downcast. He hadn't said anything in the few days it had taken him to apparate the girls and their cargo back into Britain, in fact.

The path opened up shortly, revealing a house that was quite large and crooked. Looking up at it, Ginny felt something hitch in her throat. And, with Hermione calling after her, she suddenly took off in a run toward the front door. Hermione sped up slightly, but didn't want to leave Lupin too far back. Her heart lurched as a sudden, agonized wail came from just inside the front door.

Her pace slowed considerably, Hermione fell into step next to Lupin as the two made their way up to the front of the Burrow. Lupin turned the opposite way to gently lower the boxes to the ground as Hermione tentatively walked up to the open door. Inside, she could see (and hear) Ginny and her mother, sobbing against one another. Her hands shaking, Hermione quickly put them into the pockets of her robe and closed her eyes. She was there to try and support Ginny, after all. It wouldn't do her any good to join them.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Weasley eventually looked up, seeing that her daughter hadn't come by herself. Gently taking Ginny by the shoulders, she moved her back just slightly. Ginny stepped off into

the kitchen to sit with her head down on the table as her mother stepped outside, wiping at her eyes and sniffling occasionally.

"Thank you, dear, for coming with her." She said, addressing Hermione, who hadn't moved. "I... we knew the night it happened. The clock woke us up. But..."

Hermione closed her eyes even tighter and took a long, slow breath before feeling capable of talking normally. "I didn't want her to be alone. And... Harry can take care of himself from this point on, I think. We're... we're going to be staying. If that's okay..."

"Of course it's okay." Mrs. Weasley said softly, walking over and wrapping her arms around the Gryffindor. And, her voice growing even quieter, she continued, "And you don't have to act strong just for us. We'll all be spending a lot of time crying. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But..." Hermione began, trying to will her shoulders to stop shaking.

"No buts, young lady." Mrs. Weasley said. "If you need to get it out of your system, get it out of your system. Don't try to bottle these things up, it will only make you feel worse."

Hermione just nodded slightly, still trying to muffle her own unavoidable fit of tears. Smiling sadly down at her, Mrs. Weasley's gaze then turned to Remus Lupin, who was knelt between the two boxes, a hand on the top of each. "Remus?"

"The one night I wasn't with them..." Lupin murmured, his voice dry and rough.

Brow furrowing, Mrs. Weasley looked down at Hermione, who was now looking strangely at Lupin through blurred eyes. Seeming to understand the silent question, Hermione looked up and said, "There was a full moon recently... he was recovering the night we attacked..."

Mrs. Weasley sighed then. "Go join Ginny, would you, dear?" She asked. Nodding, Hermione walked off into the house, wiping at her

eyes. Mrs. Weasley watched until she had disappeared around the corner before looking back to Lupin. "Is that true?"

"What difference does it make?" Gruffed Lupin. "I'm not an invalid. I could have gone with them."

"Remus Lupin, don't you dare blame yourself for... for what happened!" Mrs. Weasley stated, her voice rising in volume as she approached the werewolf. "I have helped you after your transformations in the past and know exactly how it affects you! And knowing you, you went off without any Wolfsbane to help you out! I won't have you sitting there acting as though you're the one who did this!"

Lupin said nothing, though he bowed his head. "Molly..."

"I know they liked you, Remus. They liked Sirius, too." Mrs. Weasley said, her tone softening as she knelt next to Lupin. "One generation of prank-players to the next. Remus? Do... do you know how...?"

"Protecting Harry." Lupin said, quietly. "He finally woke up the night before we left. I don't know if you're aware, Molly, but the Gauntlet has driven him to the brink of madness. Voldemort sent Wormtail after Harry, knowing it would probably spark that hatred in him. After all, if Wormtail hadn't gotten away, Sirius might still be alive... Harry showed us what happened via pensieve. The twins stunned him when they saw the madness trying to gain command. They fought against an empowered Wormtail and a good dozen strong Death Eaters. They held their own, too. But... you know Harry. He did a number on himself breaking their body-bind. But he was in no condition to assist them at that point. Harry doesn't know what they did. He said there was a bright, white light and the sound of laughter..."

"And... how is Harry?" Molly asked, trying to keep her voice level.

"Bad. He says after the twins fell... he has some system of locks in place in regards to the Gauntlet and how much power the ghost in the gem lets him access. Each one he opens wears him down faster and faster. The third and final one only gives him a minute before it

renders him practically useless. He was already in bad shape when he opened it, Molly. It did considerable damage to him. He said he didn't care how badly his body was damaged, he needed to make sure the others didn't suffer the same fate as the twins. Draco, Pansy, and Tonks were the closest, but they had done alright for themselves. So Harry went on to Ginny, Hermione, and Luna. Just as well, as they were in trouble. He managed to kill the Death Eaters who had ambushed them, but..."

"But...?"

"He pushed his body beyond its breaking point, Molly. He's damn lucky he didn't end up a squib. But his own magic began eating away at his body. Dr. Sventon, head physician in Sergei Wagner's city, said Harry lost almost twenty-five pounds just from opening the third lock in his already badly-injured state. He's got small cuts littered all over his body, including one deep gouge on his right leg that's going to scar badly. His hair nearly turned white from the severe drain on his personal resources, and his mental health is worse than ever. We could barely get a word out of him, and even then, he talked in a quiet, monotone voice. He's blaming himself for their deaths, of course." Lupin murmured, bringing a hand up to his eyes and wiping at them quickly. "Losing the twins has hit him hard. He's...asked us to do something for him, Molly. And I agree with his logic."

"What?"

"He wants the Order guarding Fred and George's graves once their funeral is over with. Solieyu Reinhardt was dug up and reanimated by Voldemort, Molly. Harry's deathly afraid of him coming for the twins, as well." Lupin said, looking over his shoulder at Mrs. Weasley, who had her hands over her mouth. Nodding at her expression, he continued, "We almost had him, Molly. Those were the last of the Death Eaters' camps. He would have probably killed Voldemort by now had this all not occurred. As is, it's been put off until Harry recovers, both physically and mentally. He wouldn't say as much, but I know it must be tearing him up inside."

Mrs. Weasley remained silent for awhile before placing a hand on Lupin's back and murmuring, "I'll need to get ahold of the others.

Bring them inside, would you? Set... set them by the fire. I don't want them to be cold out here."

"Of course, Molly." Lupin whispered, standing and levitating the boxes back into the air.

"Remus?"

"Yes?"

"What I said to Hermione holds true for you, as well. Don't try to hold it in if you need to let it out. No one's going to think lesser of you for crying." Mrs. Weasley said, gently.

"I don't think I have the tears anymore." Lupin said. "I did my mourning the night they returned."

"Be that as it may, you don't need to hold back in front of us. Alright?"

"Alright..."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Leaning back on his arms, Harry stared blankly up at the stars, his eyes unfocused. He was sitting outside of Ur'terash, some distance away, near the spot he and his friends had originally touched down. The church still stood, though it looked even more pathetic than it had when Harry had first laid eyes on it. If the church looked bad, it had nothing on Harry, who looked as though he hadn't slept in a month. His eyes had dark circles under them, which stood in sharp contrast to his almost snow white hair and eye color, something that he hadn't experienced since saving Hogsmeade. His robes had been adjusted to account for his newer, thinner frame, though they still seemed to hang off of him in places. He had barely spoken to anyone since waking up. He hadn't said goodbye to Ginny and Hermione when they had left with Lupin. The most he had said had been his warning for the Order or Aurors to keep guard on the twins' graves.

His Occlumency had been of no use to him. To be honest, he hadn't even really been trying to keep it active. Whatever anyone else might

have told him, this time he knew for a fact it was his own fault that people close to him had been killed. And for what? Just to keep him one step away from the verge of madness? He would have recovered. He knew he would have recovered! It wasn't worth their needless sacrifice!

Biting down hard on his lower lip, Harry closed his eyes. Moments later, the metallic taste of blood filled part of his mouth. That was fine. He knew how to deal with that. He knew how to get past that. And focusing on his bloody lip was better than focusing on anything else. Naturally, everyone had been trying to convince Harry that it was the twins' decision. That they did it for the greater good. That it was all so Harry wouldn't be wasting more time. But that wasn't right. Surely they would have known what their sacrifice would do. Surely they knew Harry would have flown off the handle at that. Weren't they supposed to be more intelligent than they let on?

Hand clawing at the dirt, Harry opened his eyes to cast a bitter glare at the sky. More power than anyone else and it was doing nothing but crippling him. He should have been an unstoppable force by now. He should have been able to kill Voldemort, all his Death Eaters, and anyone else that stood in his way. He should have been back in Britain by now. He should have been able to settle back into a normal life. Instead, here he was, out in the middle of Germany, sitting by himself in the darkness, with two more deaths on his conscience.

Lifting his right hand, he stared blankly at the Gauntlet. It had nearly snaked its way up to his shoulder now. He could feel it trying to pierce his skin in several places. It was a parasite and nothing more. A parasite that wildly limited his power. He would have been able to harness his magic eventually. Had it all been necessary? All the deaths? All the torment? If he had just tried to do things differently, would Solieu have been alive? Would Fred and George? Would Sirius have made it through his fifth year?

Closing his eyes again, he found himself standing in the clock tower. Across the room, slumped into a chair, was the young Balthazar. Sensing a presence, he looked up from the old, worn-out book he had been reading.

"Yes?" He asked.

"What happens if they're all gone?" Harry asked.

"What?"

"The gears. If there was nothing holding my power back to begin with..." Harry began.

"It would eat away at you like it did when you had the third lock open." Balthazar stated, snapping the book shut. "I know where this is going. And it's pointless. Go back out there and I'll stay in here. Then we'll all be happy. With luck, we'll be rid of one another soon enough."

A twitch in his left eye, Harry strode across the room, reached down, and hefted Balthazar up by the scruff of his robes. Jerking the ghost forward, Harry growled, "What was your plan, old man? Because it sure as hell couldn't have been this! Were you too scared of truly dying, after having 'lived' so long in the gem, that you were desperate to find some poor, dumb wizard to leech life from?! Was it a desire to try and gain command?! Was it some long-gone sense of justice trying to break free? Did you want the Gauntlet reforged just so you could prove to yourself that your damn little project could actually work?! What was it?!"

Eyes narrowing, Balthazar spat back, "Oh, is that why you're here? Trying to shift the blame to me, are you? It's your own fault that you're in this shape! You're the fool who demanded I open the third lock!"

"The girls would have died if I hadn't shown up!" Snarled Harry.

"Seems to me Draco's team arrived shortly after you did." Balthazar said, snorting. "They were in good shape. They would have been able to beat those Death Eaters without your help." He smiled darkly. "Poor Harry. Does it hurt to have the truth rubbed in your face so openly? For someone to outright tell you that you weren't needed? That what you did was the act of a man desperate to prove himself?!"

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't blast the Gauntlet off my arm right now." Harry said, his voice barely a whisper. "Give me a reason,

Balthazar, because from where I stand, there isn't much incentive to keep this up!"

"Voldemort." Chirped Balthazar, a nasty smirk on his face. "You're stuck with me until you stop being such an idiot and actually decide to go fight him! How many times could you have attacked in the months we've been up here?! Squandered because you felt you weren't strong enough. And now look what it's gotten you!"

Shoving Balthazar back into his chair, Harry sneered down at the ghost. "Yes, look what it's gotten me. A taste of what I can do. More friends lost. A feeling of all-consuming hopelessness that I'll never win! Is that what you wanted to hear me say, old man?"

Picking his book back up, Balthazar flipped it open and began trying to find the spot he had left off. "You'd be nothing right now if not for me. You should show more gratitude. Or one day, when you need me, I won't respond. I don't obey your every whim, boy. I help you because it's the right thing to do and nothing more."

"I need you?" Harry repeated. "I don't think so."

Standing, Balthazar began walking toward the gears, still glancing down at the open book. "Then let's test that theory. I'll open all the locks again, only it'll be at a slower tempo. And then? Then I'll just open all the OTHER gears on this wall. I'll hold back only enough to ensure your body isn't ripped asunder. But you'll have full access to nearly every ounce of your magic. Shall we see how strong your willpower truly is, Harry Potter?" When no response came, Balthazar began to laugh. "Very well. Brace yourself, child, as this is going to hurt."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Sergei Wagner couldn't remember the last time he truly felt as old as he actually was. The last few months had alternated between very good and absolutely horrible. Harry was despondent again, and five of his friends had gone home, two of them in coffins. Their plans for a one-two punch on Voldemort had gone up in smoke, and it was

looking as though the final assault would be delayed until Harry found his way out of the depression he had been struck by.

Glancing down from his position on his throne, he watched as Draco Malfoy continued planning strategies with the city's guard captains. Apparently, the blond had taken it upon himself to continue planning after seeing Harry's condition worsen. It wasn't surprising, really, what with the circumstances surrounding the boy's position in life. Wagner knew it wouldn't be easy for the younger Malfoy to allow someone else to kill his father. If, in fact, any part of his father still remained now that some time had passed since Voldemort merged with him.

Wagner had allowed Harry out of the city to try and clear his head. He knew it was dangerous, but he also knew that Harry could take care of himself. The boy needed some time off by himself. He was, after all, still very young. But then, to Wagner, most everyone seemed young in comparison. Sighing as he pushed himself up, he started down the steps toward his captains and Malfoy, aiming to see what, exactly, they were up to.

"So?" Wagner asked as he approached. "Have you worked out anything useful?"

"We know he's amassed an army of various creatures." Rhodes said, gruffly. "Manticores, giants, werewolves, vampires, our kind... we aren't sure if he's gotten any dragons in yet, but he may as well have..."

"Trying to work out where best to attack from." Malfoy commented, staring intently at the map of the region. "The cover of night means very little right now. Between the werewolves and vampires, he's got the night covered. We aren't sure what kind of undead he's got with him. No reason to think it's anything but the mindless variety, though. They haven't exactly been progressing well, what with us hitting up their camps. Manticores are just there for annoyance purposes, I assume, because they aren't that powerful. The giants, on the other hand..."

"Mm. Giants are always troublesome, as are dragons. At least with the giants, it's easier to cripple them. Dragons are made of tougher stuff than that." Wagner said, leaning against the table.

"To be honest, I've got no idea how to go about attacking them." Malfoy admitted, sounding more than a little annoyed with himself. "I've never had to worry too much about strategy or the like. That's always been Potter's area of expertise. Not that you'd know it by looking at him."

"Nothing to be done for it." Rhodes said. "Lost some friends. He's not old enough to steel himself for that. Never gets any easier, of course, but you learn to deal with it better as you go."

"The longer he does this," Malfoy began. "The higher the chance is that more of us will die. I've tried reasoning with him, but he won't have any of it in the mood he's in."

A rumbling filled the air then, causing everyone to glance up. Wagner frowned, turning to look at the guards standing near the doors. "Go find out what that was."

A brief salute, and the myriad guards left their position and vanishing into the darkness of the hallways leading to and from the throne room. Not long after, more rumbling came, feeling and sounding closer this time. Wagner narrowed his eyes at this and ordered his guard captains to go and warn the others and to send out a general alert. Malfoy was told to go off and get Harry's friends. Whatever the noise was, it sounded more and more like it was originating at the church entrance. If something had gotten in, it would have practically had to bowl Harry over to do so.

Wagner drew his wand and turned to face the lone entrance that could lead out toward the church. For awhile, his city was almost eerily silent. The sound of guards running had long since died out, and the rumbling had died down again. Wagner knew this meant little, however, and kept his guard up, just in case. This was, perhaps, what helped keep him standing when a giant plume of fire erupted through the hallway leading to the church. Bursting from the hallway and expanding rapidly, the impact nearly caught the lich off-guard.

Wand now aimed at the hallway, Wagner wasn't quite ready to see the guard he had sent down it come flying back out, his bones blackened and cracking in many places. There was an almost unmistakable aura of death coming from the hall. Whatever it was, it was out for blood. Wagner smirked despite the situation. Whoever was coming was going to have a damn hard time trying to draw blood from him.

But then, something Wagner hadn't been expecting occurred. From the blackness, looking almost bored, came Harry. His wands were floating just beside his hands, spinning wildly. When he got fully into the room, Harry glanced up and looked around. It was then that Wagner really picked up on it. The magic in the air around Harry was being destroyed and rebuilt every few seconds, as though it couldn't decide if it wanted to even exist or not. The Gauntlet on Harry's arm was glowing a sickly yellow color, which seems to be pulsing every few seconds, in sync with the magic in the air being burnt up and reformed.

Something very, very bad had just taken place, though Wagner could only guess at what it had been. He was sure it had something to do with the Gauntlet, but to what extent the artifact had been involved was unknown to him. The thing that had Wagner most on edge, however, wasn't the fact that Harry had seemingly turned against him. No, he had quite been expecting the madness to gain dominance sooner or later. It was the fact that Harry both looked and acted so calm that was bothering him the most.

"From within the night," Harry began, the tips of his wands glowing as they spun around faster and faster, "I call upon that which time has forgotten. Lost within the stars, I give you a path to your salvation. Unleash your anger on those who dare stand before me and deliver them to their gods. Eternity's embrace...ASTRUM VENATOR!"

The tips of Harry's wands grew dark as the ceiling of the throne room split open. From the crack poured a thick, black ooze. Dripping like blood to the floor, it began to take form. Multiple legs and arms took shape slowly, and mouths seemed to appear and disappear throughout the thing's ever-changing body. At the same times, eyes

of different shapes and sizes would break through the sludge, look around, and then sink back into the inky blackness. The creature slowly moved toward Wagner, whose aim was moving between Harry and the monstrosity he had summoned forth.

It had been many decades since Wagner had last seen a wizard use an old, proper incantation to call up such a creature. Even in his day, it had been rare for wizards and witches to keep to the old ways. They could produce incredibly strong results, as evidenced by the shambling monster Harry had managed to summon. But they were usually so long and complicated that it gave one's opponent ample time to attack. Wagner wasn't sure what Harry was doing, but if madness was the source, he knew what he had to do.

"Erfrieren!" Wagner hissed under his breath, jabbing the air with his wand. An arc of cold shot out, colliding with the slow-moving creature. The creature's many mouths reappeared all at once to let out an agonized roar as its body began to harden. Wagner narrowed his eyes, intensifying the power used. Within seconds, the creature had been frozen solid. And, with a quick jerk of his wrist, Wagner shouted, "ZERBRECHEN!"

The creature suddenly shattered into hundreds of small pieces, leaving Wagner's gaze solely focused on Harry, who was watching with calculating eyes. Then, an unmistakably psychotic grin split the boy's face as he laughed.

"As expected, Wagner..." Harry said, a few lingering chuckles breaking his speech. "But that was simple. I can dredge up much, much worse than that..."

"Something get the better of you, Harry?" Asked Wagner, his tone conversational.

"Balthazar gave me access to my power. It's... intoxicating." Harry explained. With a dark smile, he continued, "You could have saved them. You're no different than Albus. Sitting in safety, letting your underlings do all the work. How could I not see it until now? How could I let myself be manipulated yet again?! No more. Not now. Not

ever. You're going to die again, Wagner. And I'll see to it that no one can bring you back!"

"You're certainly welcome to try." Wagner said, ignoring the boy's words. He knew better than to take someone at face value when they clearly weren't well. Harry full well understood the limits of Wagner's powers. "Though I warn you - if you attack me or anyone else in this city again, I won't go easy on you."

"Finally, someone who will fight me as an equal..." Harry purred, his wands flying up near his head. "Go on, then. I'll let you take a shot. Fair is fair, after all. I did summon something from the dark parts of the world to try and devour you, after all. Let's see what you can do to me..."

Wagner moved at a speed he hadn't had to move at in many, many years, using his magic to augment his own movement. It was almost like apparating, though he never hit a stopping point. He merely set waypoints and moved from one to the other. Harry's eyes darted after him effortlessly, which was more than slightly irritating to the lich. Clearly, speed wasn't going to be a factor in his fight with Harry. Coming to a halt back near his throne, Wagner aimed his wand at Harry's head. He was going to have to brute force the Ravenclaw into submission.

"Better hurry." Harry commented. "I may get bored and decide to begin casting again."

"Granatsplitter." Wagner breathed.

Harry cocked an eyebrow, glancing around the room before looking back at Wagner with narrowed eyes. "And what was that supposed to do?"

"Keep you from moving. Mostly." Wagner said. "ANMUTEN!"

Dozens of small, twisted pieces of metal appeared around Harry's left leg. And, too fast to be countered or stopped, they shot forth, piercing through the area around Harry's knee. Letting out a pained yell, Harry dropped to the ground, clutching his left leg. Seething through

clenched teeth, Wagner noticed a dark red mist coming out of Harry's mouth. One eye squeezed shut, Harry aimed at his own leg and growled, "OS RENOVO!"

Clenching his teeth as his kneecap fixed and reset, Harry was given enough time to access his Occlumency and shut down the pain receptors to his injured leg. He knew damn well it wasn't healed anywhere near what it should have been, but he couldn't be stopped by such a simple spell. Not at this point. Not with all of his power at his disposal. Panting slowly, with more mist seeping from the corners of his mouth with each breath, Harry rapidly began speaking under his breath as he struggled back to his feet.

"Burning like the heart of the sun, engulf my enemy and consume him from within! Bathed in fire - IGNIS SEPULCHRUM!"

Wagner bit out a curse as fire erupted from the floor, encasing his body in a pillar of flame. It was a feeling he had hoped to never experience again. Long ago, he had been locked in combat with a wizard who was strangely knowledgeable in the field of fire spells. He had barely managed to win the battle, though it had left its scars on him. Fire was one of the few things that could truly bring pain to a being with deadened feelings. And now, here he was, trapped by it. The flames ate away at his robes slowly, despite him trying to cast everything he knew to counter it.

And then, just as quickly as it had started, it had ended. Dropping to the ground, his skeletal frame literally smoking, Wagner looked up. Harry wasn't focused on him anymore. Rather, he was looking across the room at the one who had apparently just sent some curse or another his way. Letting out a groan as he pushed himself back upright, Wagner hissed, "He's lost his mind! Be on your guard! Let me handle him!"

Harry's eyes slid to the left for a moment as he murmured, "Yes. You've done so well thus far, haven't you?" Eyes leaving Wagner, they then focused on Draco Malfoy's. "And you have just signed your own death warrant."

Malfoy, who had been the first of Harry's friends to arrive back at the scene, had acted on instinct, trying to petrify Harry. But that, it seemed, wasn't going to work this time. Taking in everything, he came quickly to the conclusion that the something had happened to the Gauntlet. Wagner looked like he was in bad shape, which was an ill omen, and there were no guards in sight. It was just as well, Malfoy reasoned to himself, keeping both wands aimed at Harry, who made no motion to mirror the blond's actions. They probably would have just been incinerated, anyway.

"Letting the ghost get the better of you, Potter? That's very unlike you." Malfoy stated.

"The better of me?" Repeated Harry. "Draco, you misunderstand. We reached an agreement. I'm finally able to use all my magical power!"

"Yes, and are you then going to use it to kill those still remaining by your side?!" Malfoy shouted. "Why let Voldemort do it when you can handle it on your own, huh? That the way you're seeing this world now, Potter? Has the madness clouded your vision that much?"

Harry flinched slightly at Malfoy's words. "I'm not going to kill everyone." He stated, trying to force his voice to be calm. He wasn't doing a very good job, however. "Just those who try to stand in my way."

"Does that include me?" Came Tonks' voice. She and the others who were still staying in Ur'terash were entering the room now. Harry looked at her, but didn't reply.

"Destroy everything." Harry eventually said, extending his arms to the side slowly. "If people keep standing in my way, then the solution is simple. Destroy everything and continue forward" He glanced up at Solieu, smirking. "Victory, no matter the cost. Right?"

"Is this what you've been fighting for?" Asked Solieu, eyes narrowed. "Is that the kind of screwed up mantra you've been chanting since my death?"

"Am I wrong?" Harry asked, smiling.

"Of course you are." Solieyu replied. "Victory comes only if that which you're protecting remains safe. From my unique position, it seems you haven't gotten close to victory at all. You're doing nothing but playing into Voldemort's plan for you. Do you insist on continuing like this?"

Stepping toward the former vampire, Harry nodded. "Naturally. It's the path of least resistance. I don't care who stands between me and that victory. I will grasp it, no matter how high the price. I won't be used by anyone anymore. My life is my own. You're welcome to try stopping me, of course. But as you saw, it's futile. Magic won't do very much at all to me at this point. So what could you hope to--"

Harry's head snapped to one side and he stumbled to the ground as a fist connected with his cheek. Rolling over onto his back, he stared wide-eyed up at Draco Malfoy, who was glaring down at him, a satisfied smirk on his face. His fist was still extended. Harry began to say something, but paused, his tongue moving around for a moment. Seconds later, a trickle of blood slipped from the corner of his mouth.

"...You punched me." Harry stated.

"Yeah, well, someone had to." Malfoy said. "You've had that coming for seven years, Potter."

Harry started to get up, but Malfoy wouldn't let him. Rushing in, Malfoy put all of the force he could behind a second punch. Harry's head snapped back once more. And before he could even try to lift it back up, Malfoy had landed a third punch, one that bounced Harry's head off the cold stone floor. Harry had dropped his wands when the initial punch had landed, but Malfoy knew he could summon them at will. One knee on Harry's chest, Malfoy grabbed Harry by the wrists, pinning him to the ground.

"Someone grab his wands!" Malfoy yelled.

Shuffling over slowly, Wagner leaned over and plucked the two wands from the ground. He still looked awful, but it seemed as though

he was recovering admirably. "He won't get them back as long as I'm holding them..."

Harry, for his part, was glaring across the room as though someone had cancelled Christmas. Eyes moving to the side to look at Malfoy, he asked, "Was that really necessary?"

"I'd wager I could've been a bit more forceful." Malfoy replied, smirking again. "So... here we are, fighting like firsties."

"Bit large for a firstie, aren't you?" Harry asked.

"Whereas you're about as bony as Wagner's people." Malfoy retorted.

"I could escape at any time, you realize." Harry stated.

"Oh? How do you plan to go about that? I've got you pinned down and Wagner has your wands." Said Malfoy.

"It'd be quite easy getting you off of me." Harry said, grinning now.

"Go on then, what's your master plan? Astound me, Potter." Malfoy said, raising an eyebrow.

Harry suddenly raised a leg. Which, while not catching Malfoy properly in the back, did manage to throw him off-balance enough that he nearly fell off of Harry's chest. Quickly, the blond shifted his leg to the side of Harry's chest, glaring down at the Ravenclaw.

"This was your great idea? Trying to hit me in the back? How the mighty have fallen." Malfoy said.

"Says the pureblood who's now straddling his rival suggestively." Purred Harry.

Somewhere across the room, Pansy suddenly snorted, spinning around and hiding her face.

"...How long have you been back to normal?" Asked Malfoy, sounding exasperated.

"Bout the time you decided to bounce my head off the floor." Harry said, grinning up at Malfoy.

"Thought it'd be fun to torment me, did you?"

"I was enjoying myself." Harry said. Glancing back at Wagner, he frowned. "Uh..."

"What happened?" Asked Wagner.

Harry's eyes fell on the Gauntlet. "Balthazar decided he would teach me a lesson about power, apparently. The faster the little parasite is off, the better."

"Ask and ye shall receive." Came Balthazar's voice, his gem in the Gauntlet pulsing as he spoke. "You brought it on yourself."

"How do you feel?" Asked Wagner. "Doesn't appear your full power drained you as it should have."

"Guess I pissed off the ghost enough to make him actually start working." Harry snarked. "Why he hasn't done that thus far is beyond me."

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to control that much magic? I'm going to be useless for a good while."

"You tell me this now?!" Harry snapped.

"You never asked before." Replied Balthazar.

"Would you two both shut up?!" Barked Malfoy. "I don't care whose fault it is. Ghost, you're an asshole. Potter, you're a twat. Now can we stop in-fighting and resume planning to kill the real problem? Or would one of you old women like to bicker some more?!"

"...I'll put up with him. But only because I won't have to for much longer." Muttered Harry, trying not to pout for being told off.

"I'll try not to teach the smart-mouthed little brat any more lessons." Replied Balthazar, his tone dry.

"Hey, Draco?" Pansy said.

"What?"

"You gonna straddle Harry all day? Because if you are, I'd like to take some pictures."

Malfoy flushed bright red and, in one fluid motion, rolled off of Harry and stood up, facing away from Pansy and the others. "Oh, shut up."

"Aw, don't you like being on top?" Asked Harry, giving Malfoy big doe eyes from the floor. For his troubles, he was kicked (perhaps harder than necessary) in the side. "Ow!"

Sitting up and rubbing his sore ribs, Harry muttered, "Didn't hafta kick me. Dick."

Malfoy turned away from Harry and walked toward Wagner. "Feeling any better?"

"It'll take more than a bit of fire to burn this scarecrow." Wagner said, tossing Harry his wands back. "Harry, do try to keep your Gauntlet in line, would you?"

"Sorry." Harry mumbled. "And that goes to all of you."

Malfoy rolled his eyes, spun around, and kicked Harry in the gut, sending him crashing backwards once more. His head bounced off the floor for the second time that night.

"The hell was that for?!" Harry yelled, wincing as he pushed himself back up.

"Continually apologizing for things out of your damn control!" Malfoy snapped. "Get the hell up, stop apologizing for everything, and start acting like the damn leader you've set yourself up to be! We all know you're fighting more than one battle, but if you proved anything

tonight, it's that you're tougher than you look. So man up and let's get this show on the road."

Harry scowled at this, but nodded, rubbing idly at his stomach. When Malfoy extended a hand, he stared at it warily for a moment before accepting it. Getting back to his feet, he tucked his wands away and sighed. "I need some sleep."

"I think we all do." Malfoy said, shaking his head. "Tomorrow, we get to work. We've put this off far too long as is. We're going to go and kill anything Voldemort has. Any walls he's constructed so far, we're going to knock down. Feeling a bit better now that you've seen what you're actually capable of?"

"I'm not as worried about the Susceptor now, if that's what you mean." Harry said. "So long as Balthazar does his job, of course."

"I'll do what's necessary." Balthazar said.

Harry cast Tonks a wary look. "You gonna hit me if I walk over there?"

"Draco?" Tonks said.

Malfoy nodded, turned, and punched Harry in the arm as hard as he could. Rubbing at his now-sore knuckles, he stated, "You're hard on the hands, Potter."

"Too scrawny." Tonks said. "Alright, he's hit you enough. You're safe from my wrath for now. Come on... let's get some sleep."

Sulking now, Harry crossed the room to join Tonks, who put her arm around his shoulders and led him off into the nearest hallway.

After they had left, Malfoy turned back to Wagner. "So how are you really doing?"

"Going to be a bit sore for awhile. That's saying something, given my condition." Wagner said. "It's been a long time since someone

managed to actually hurt me. And now? I'm also very nervous over what that ghost's intentions truly are."

"What do you mean?" Asked Luna. "He's helped Harry so far, not counting tonight."

"Yes. Not counting tonight. He could have shut Harry down at any point. So why let him endanger his friends? Why risk attacking me? There's something going on here, I'm just not sure what it is yet." Wagner said, walking slowly back up to his throne. Collapsing onto it, he added, "Keep a close eye on him over the next few days. If anything at all seems off about him and I don't notice, I want you to tell me."

"You expecting it to happen again?" Malfoy asked, crossing his arms.

"Doubtful. The ghost wouldn't try that again so soon. If Harry dies, he's in trouble. He's told me that the Gauntlet's been 'growing' in a way, extending further up his arm. Were I to hazard a guess, it's going to extend until it's gotten to his heart or his brain. If it goes for his heart, the ghost will essentially be able to force Harry to do what he wants. Otherwise he'll just cause his heart to explode. If it gets to his brain, he won't need to hold him hostage."

"You think that's what's going on? Balthazar wants to... what, commandeer Potter?" Malfoy asked, frowning.

"After tonight? I'm almost positive. More than the inherent madness associated with being fused with the Gauntlet, we need to ensure that Harry gets that thing off of him before it goes beyond his shoulder. Otherwise it'll get complicated. As long as it's below that point, we can safely remove his arm. It won't be pretty, but it's better than the alternatives." Wagner said, eyes closing. "Were I to guess what's happening beyond that, I would probably say that over the years, the ghost has lost his mind. His sense of justice has twisted. He wants to use Harry to kill anyone he thinks is evil. For what purpose? I can only guess at that, as well. Suffice to say, that device is far more dangerous than I think anyone has thought."

"Great. More worries." Malfoy said. "When do you think is the soonest we can mobilize?"

"I'll be fine by morning. Harry looks like he's alright. Which is also worrying. With that much of his magic, why didn't it eat away at him?"

"Another point to revealing Balthazar for what he is?" Asked Malfoy.

"I believe so. The ghost is probably playing Harry like a fiddle, giving him all these false rules and such. That night the third lock was opened? It wouldn't surprise me if the ghost, at some point, forced Harry's magic to backfire on him. That's why he wasted away like he did. That's why he was able to use far greater magic tonight than back then. That ghost has his own plans."

"I wonder..." Malfoy began, brow creased. "...I wish I had been paying attention now."

"To what?" Asked Pansy.

"Every time Potter undoes that lock system, he's weakened, correct?"

"Yeah..."

"What if Balthazar is using that weakened state to extend the Gauntlet's reach?" Asked Malfoy. "What if he can only make his move when Harry's obviously at a point where he can't resist? He's done it slowly enough that Harry hasn't connected it yet, I bet."

"Do you think that's really the case?" Luna asked.

"I do now." Malfoy said. "...We won't be able to tell him, though. That's the thing. After we kill Voldemort, sure. But... he's going to apparently have to open the locks to use the Susceptor. And... ah, dammit. What if that's what Balthazar is waiting for? What if he can take over Potter then? Anyone happen to notice how much the Gauntlet 'grew' after the night the Weasley twins were killed?"

"If anyone would have, it would be Tonks." Solieyu said. "We need to talk to her next time she and Harry are away from one another."

"Yes. Have her take note of where it is now. Tomorrow, I'm going to run a test." Wagner said. "I'm going to have Harry spar with me again. It will be under the false pretense of seeing if he can use the same type of magic he used tonight. I'll get him to open to at least the second lock. Then we'll see if our theory is true. It will delay our push on Voldemort, but..."

"It may save Potter's life." Malfoy finished. Sighing, he ran a hand back through his hair. "Can nothing be simple?"

"Not with us." Pansy said, walking over. "Let's all try to get some rest. It may be getting very stressful come tomorrow."

"If the Gauntlet IS growing when Harry's weakened from using the lock system, though, then what?" Asked Solieyu, looking at Wagner.

"We will cross that bridge when we come to it. If need be, we'll just have to alter our plans." Wagner said. "We may have to remove Harry's arm before he faces Voldemort."

"He won't have the power to use the Susceptor then." Luna said. "How will he...?"

"The only thing I can think of is to allow Voldemort into my city." Wagner said, through gritted teeth. "I can fight him at full strength in here, but it would be at great risk to every single person living here. I could evacuate them, but..."

"That many undead people would be hard to hide. Damn it." Malfoy spat. "No matter what happens, things are looking pretty bleak."

"Indeed they are." Wagner said. "But, as they say, it is always darkest before the dawn. With a little luck, we will all live to see that sun rise."

"A little luck..." Malfoy said, his eyes lighting up suddenly. "That's it!"

"What?" Pansy asked.

"That damned flask of Felix Felicis that Harry brought with him!" Malfoy exclaimed. "Okay, I have a plan. We'll have Tonks check Potter's arm. Wagner will run him through his paces, and we'll see if there's any growth to the Gauntlet. If there is, we'll run another test. We'll have to get Potter to take a drink of that potion before fighting Wagner a second time."

"...Do you think the luck imbued by the potion will be able to allow him enough control that he doesn't weaken from opening the locks?" Asked Wagner, head raising slightly.

"If not that, then it might keep the growth from occurring." Malfoy said, smirking. "The hardest part will be getting Potter to take a drink. He's saving it for the battle with Voldemort. Wanted us all to have a sip. But now that we've got a few of our number..."

"...He can spare a bit." Pansy finished. "Do you really think it might work?"

"I think it's worth a try. If using the Felix can stunt the growth of the Gauntlet when the locks are opened, we just have to ensure that Potter drinks as much of the stuff as it's safe to before he fights Voldemort. A little sip might not have a grand effect, but... a lot of the stuff might be just enough to keep the growth from spreading beyond his shoulder." Malfoy said. "What do you think, Wagner?"

"I think it's worth a try." Wagner said. "Right, you lot get to sleep. I have some planning to get done."

Malfoy nodded and, talking among the others, the group left the throne room. Wagner watched them filter out, slowly twirling his wand between his fingers. It was a dangerous plan. If the ghost caught on for even a second, things could get bad. If Balthazar refused to work with Harry, then Ur'terash would almost certainly end up being sacrificed. And that was assuming they could lure Voldemort into the city in the first place. There were a lot gambits in place now. All that was left was to see exactly how they would play out.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: And so we start to see something deeper. Balthazar might not be as altruistic as he appears to be. But is that really what's taking place? Is he really using Harry's weakened state to slowly take over his body? And if so, what's his ultimate goal? I guess you'll just have to keep reading to find out, won't you?

We're officially into the endgame of book 7, kids. We only have a few chapters left. I hope you'll enjoy the ride. Because it doesn't end with this book. Not really. There's still a tale to be told after this ends. And I hope you follow me along the path I take these characters down. I promise it'll be a fun ride.

Post-Edit Note: As it stands, Gauntlet is going to be 23 chapters. And instead of an 8th book, I plan for flashback chapters in the sequel series (F-Series 1). Things will need to be altered just slightly, but it's flow a LOT smoother. And make more sense. Anyway, just felt I'd fill y'all in on the change.

## Chapter 20 – Catalyst

Malfoy sighed as he leaned against the table in Wagner's throne room. Everyone but Tonks and Harry had been assembled to hear the bad news. Tonks had said that she would ensure that Harry stayed put, to which Malfoy had thanked her. The reasoning was obvious - they had been right. Wagner had put Harry through the paces. The Gauntlet was indeed slithering up Harry's arm slightly any time the locks were opened. Harry was clueless, of course, as Wagner was completely unreadable and his motives felt true. And, in truth, it wasn't a lie. After the third lock had been opened, Harry hadn't fought at all. Wagner genuinely had wanted to see how the boy was doing.

As it turned out, Harry was just as good a fighter as he had previously been. If anything, the abrupt weight loss was an ever-so-slight help to him. Smaller body, smaller target. But the fact remained that the ghost was taking over Harry's body. Whether or not it was intentional would be difficult to tell. However, after the releasing of Harry's magic, it was a safe bet to assume it was true. If it wasn't, then they had nothing to worry about. They just wanted to keep a plan in place should it turn out poorly.

"Well," Malfoy finally said, turning around and sighing, "At least we know."

"Now what?" Solieyu asked.

"Now?" Wagner said, sitting at his throne and looking far better than he had on the night of the attack. "Now we march on Voldemort's camp. Harry is fighting at full. Or at least as full as the ghost is allowing him to safely fight. He'll be ready tomorrow if all goes well. I want to make sure the rest of you are, as well. My men are getting themselves ready as we speak, and there has so far been no movement from our enemy. Whether he isn't aware we're preparing to mount our assault or whether he is merely biding his time and waiting for just that is unknown. We're to assume the latter, however, and we are trying to plan accordingly."

Malfoy glanced aside at Solieyu for a moment, his eyes darting to Luna briefly. He knew what was going to happen once they won. Well, he figured, he always was blunt in his approach. Turning to face Wagner once more, he asked, "What of Reinhardt?"

"What of me?" Asked Solieyu.

"All the dead men we've killed so far resume being corpses when we've killed their masters." Drawled the Slytherin. "There's no reason to think you'll be any different, is there?"

"Draco!" Hissed Pansy, elbowing Malfoy in the side.

Wincing, Malfoy scowled. "I'm being realistic, Pansy. I... want them to have time to prepare and say goodbye. They didn't get that luxury the first time around."

"Is that true?" Solieyu asked, glancing from Malfoy to Wagner.

"Potentially. I've reason to believe Voldemort himself brought you back. His magic is strong. And Harry doesn't plan to outright kill him. What this means for you, I cannot say. It's possible that entering this 'Void' Harry speaks of will break the magic binding your soul back with your body. If that's the case, you will indeed be able to rest once more. In peace, this time, if all goes well." Wagner stated, quietly.

"Luna?" Solieyu said, turning to the blonde.

Luna smiled sadly, though she wouldn't meet his eyes. "I've tried not to think about it. But Draco is correct... when we were attacking the Death Eaters' camps, the undead people guarding them would stop moving once their masters were dead..."

"I see." Solieyu murmured. "...Well, I guess that's good news."

"Solieyu?" Luna said, frowning.

"I'll be able to wait for you after all." Solieyu said, smiling crookedly. "I wasn't meant to be back. I'm sure my family has been worried. Try

not to be too sad, Luna. It'll be like finally getting to sleep after being forced to remain awake for weeks on end."

"I know... it won't make it any easier, though." Luna murmured.

"So..." Malfoy began. "What are we doing as far as Potter's concerned?"

"Harry's arm should be able to endure the third lock's opening again." Wagner said. "If not, I'll cleave it off myself should any abnormalities arise. The plan goes as Potter originally intended it to. We'll try and keep Voldemort's army off of him while he goes straight for Voldemort himself. The Lucidus Susceptor will open a portal to the Void and Voldemort will be pulled in. At that point, one of you may need to get to Harry quickly. We don't know how bad he'll be after the spell ends. Or if the ghost will attempt to make his move at that point in time. There's a lot we're going to have to be mindful of. I've told this to my men, as well. We go into this knowing we're likely outnumbered. They fight knowing they may die. This is, with any luck, where the war against this Dark Lord comes to an end. Voldemort will fall and his followers will BURN."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Inside the clock tower, Balthazar sat in his chair. His legs were crossed and he was slowly, rhythmically tapping the right arm. He didn't like waiting. And he didn't like what Wagner had been trying to dance around. He was no fool. He knew exactly what the old lich was attempting to ascertain. It couldn't be helped, of course. Balthazar had no control over how much the Gauntlet 'grew' on Harry when the locks were undone. All he could do was comply and hope. After all, what other chance like this would ever come along? Harry had to be the one. He was immensely powerful. He was just too afraid to harness that power. Balthazar had initially suggested the lock system as a way of expediting the Gauntlet's control. He knew it would be the only way Harry could start to use his power to any capacity.

If the full control was any indication, Harry was perfectly capable now of handling the strain of all of his magic. Were the Gauntlet to somehow be removed at this point, Harry would be fine. He no longer

needed that regulation. But he wouldn't be told that. At least, not until the point in time when Balthazar could act. Fighting evil was something that could not be bound to the laws and regulations of others. It had to go over that, which is something he had helped Harry to realize that year. And, once Voldemort was out of the way, the possibilities opened up. The first thing that needed to happen, of course, was a change of how the power structure worked. Dumbledore and Scrimgeour were certainly 'good' men. But they were far too set in their ways to change in the way that was needed.

Balthazar smirked as he stared up at the gears in the room. Every single one of them now creaked and groaned constantly. Every single one of them was greatly damaged. It had occurred during the full release. The third lock being opened was just a bit of toying on his part. But that? That had been something more. That had been to weaken the self-imposed system. Once it had fully broken, the Gauntlet's power would grow until it overtook Harry. Then he would be the one calling the shots. He would be justice itself and he would determine what qualified as 'good' or 'evil.' He would be the one to sit at the end of the world, looking across the landscape at the bodies of the fallen. He would be the one to bring about a change that had been required for hundreds of years. He had failed once. He would not fail again.

oOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

It was noon when they strode from the battle-damaged Dead Gate, the bright sky overhead in stark contrast with the mission they were on. Harry, a steeled look on his face, was at the front of the pack. Behind him walked a small army of men and women, most of whom were undead. Next to Harry, Wagner stood tall, his tattered old robes billowing in the wind. From his time training with Wagner, Harry finally felt confident. Though he was still hurting from the loss of Fred and George, he knew that there was only one way to properly avenge their deaths.

"Ready, Harry?" Wagner asked, as the group began to walk in the direction of Voldemort's camps. It was a few miles away, but it would be too risky to do anything but walk there. And anyway, most of his men and women were incapable of apparating. It was... dangerous

for those so carefully pieced together to be flinging themselves about like that.

"As much as I'll ever be." Harry replied, keeping his eyes focused as far on the horizon as he could.

They had gone over the rather simplistic plans before leaving Ur'terash. Harry was only to focus on Voldemort. He couldn't afford to be watching out for anyone but himself. Wagner had promised to do that job for him. Because while the distance from his city was effectively cutting off most of his power, he was still quite skilled at combat. Whatever Voldemort had lying in wait would be for Harry's friends and Wagner's undead forces to cleave through. Voldemort himself was Harry's territory. A final showdown, as it had always meant to be.

It was early in the morning when they set out, as they knew it would take some time to get to their destination. Plus, they wanted to take short breaks every hour, just to ensure no one would be worn out by the time they actually had to begin fighting. During one of these breaks, Malfoy walked up to Harry, pulling him aside to speak.

"What's up?" Harry asked.

"Are you sure it was a wise idea for the vampire to come along? He's going to be a sitting duck, you know. And..." Malfoy began.

"When we finish off Voldemort, he's likely to die again?" Harry finished.

"You knew?"

"I'd guessed."

Malfoy looked at him strangely for a moment. "Now I genuinely am surprised you allowed him to come."

"Even if he does fall apart when I banish Voldemort, he deserves being there to see it. Voldemort was the one ultimately responsible

for his death. I figure he should be there to see me exact my revenge." Harry stated.

Nodding slowly, Malfoy asked, "So? Got your gameplan set, Potter?"

"Balthazar and I have gone over it a few times since we left the city." Harry replied, smiling. "The wands are at the ready. It's actually kind of tiring keeping them in stand-by mode like that. But I need to have them there like that. I need to be able to call them and invoke the Susceptor at the drop of a hat, ya know? Once you lot plow the road for me, and I get a clear shot, I'm taking it. No witty banter, no long, drawn out battle that wears us both down. I'm just going to aim and fire."

"You say that. But you know just as well as I do that you're going to start chatting with him the minute you two get locked into combat." Malfoy said, crossing his arms and leaning back against a nearby tree. "You aren't capable of letting him get the last word in, after all. I know you aren't."

"We'll see." Harry said, shrugging. "...It's been a long trip, huh?"

"It has. A lot's changed since you punched me in Diagon Alley." Malfoy said, absent-mindedly rubbing his chin. "If it were possible to talk to my younger self and tell him where the two of us would be today... I doubt I'd believe it. I always used to think that my father was perfect. I always thought I'd follow in his footsteps and become Voldemort's second in command when he no longer could fulfill that position."

"That changed when you saw what it was really like. Far from the glorious mental image I'm sure you had." Harry murmured.

"Indeed." Malfoy said, eyes closing as he blew out a sigh. "And now I don't even get to kill my father. I had hoped to at least get that pleasure from following you about. I guess the point life is trying to tell me is that we don't always get what we want."

"If there was a way that I could give you to have the finishing blow, I would." Harry said.

"Unfortunately, that isn't possible. I know that. I do appreciate the gesture, though." Malfoy said. Glancing aside, he smirked. "Keep your head, Potter. That's the other thing you have to accomplish today."

Returning the smirk, Harry said, "I know. For the first time in a long while, I'm feeling confident that nothing bad is going to happen to me. I just hope nothing bad happens to anyone else. I know we're not going to come out of this without casualties, but..."

"We'll do what we can to ensure that number is as low as it can be." Malfoy said, his expression growing somber. "I know you don't like to, but promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me that no matter what he says or does, no matter who gets killed, you won't lose yourself." Malfoy said.

Blinking, Harry was momentarily caught off guard. "That's... what brought this on?" He asked, brow creased.

"Because I'm not strong enough to take you down, should you take Voldemort's place." Malfoy said. "I've not got the monstrous magic pool you have, nor do I have the seemingly endless stamina you can dredge up. Make no mistake, if you turn on us, I'll be the one hunting you down. That being said, I know my own limits. I know it would be a futile fight. But I want you to have it in the back of your head. Because if I told the others what I would be doing, they would come with me. If you ever start to feel the madness seeping in, remember that letting it take control would end with you fighting those closest to you. Probably to the death."

"I don't plan to let the madness get the better of me. I promise I'll stay myself, Draco." Harry said. "So don't try focusing on me in the fight, either. Wagner already said he was going to do that."

Malfoy looked over his shoulder as Wagner called out that they needed to start moving again. As he turned back, he looked straight

into Harry's eyes. "Just remember what I said. I don't want to fight you. But I will if it comes to that."

"If I lost myself... I'd probably want you to." Harry said. "I promised you something. Now you promise me something."

"What?" Asked Malfoy.

"Don't hesitate." Harry said.

He didn't need to say any more than that. Malfoy knew exactly what he meant. "It's a promise, then. Come on. We have work to do. We can't kick back and enjoy our little vacation just yet."

oOoOoOoOoOo

The stink of death was something Harry and the others had unfortunately had to get used to. Being in a city of the dead and all, they had grown so used to it that it normally didn't even register to them anymore. Harry figured the stench couldn't get that much worse, anyway, given that he spent his days around reanimated, rotted corpses. This, however, was something he had figured wrong. It hit them nearly a mile from Voldemort's camp, and only grew as they marched ever closer to it. Ur'terash's smell was nothing in comparison to the odor coming from the encampment ahead of them.

As they pushed through the last of the trees and into a clearing, they could see why. Not only was there an absolutely enormous area to the west that was being used for necromancy purposes, but there were countless beasts chained up, stunned, or otherwise sedated loitering the place. Harry knew that Voldemort had at least a few giants as their stink was noticeable even over the death in the air. Being held down by a series of orbs on the ground around it was a large, green dragon. Briefly, Harry's mind flashed back to the Triwizard Tournament and of the studies he had done on dragons, but he couldn't place what breed this was.

Manticores were scattered here and there, being tended to by Death Eaters who looked like they wanted to do anything but. At the far end of the camp was what had to have been Voldemort's tent, which sat

away from those of his underlings. Joining the Death Eaters were two other groups of people, if their robe colors could be used as indication. Harry knew from what Solieu had told him that one of those groups probably consisted of vampires. If the other was werewolves, as he personally assumed then they, at the very least, wouldn't be too much trouble. It was just past noon and there hadn't been a full moon in some time.

All activity slowly came to a halt as the various people and creatures in the camp heard Harry's group advancing on them. For awhile, both armies simply stood and sized each other up. Then, from the back of the camp, his voice cutting the silence like a knife, came Voldemort's voice.

"Have they arrived? Ahh..."

The Dark Lord stepped out of his tent and slowly moved toward the line of trees that Harry's group had stopped at. His bandages had been removed now, though his resemblance to Lucius Malfoy was far less than what Harry had imagined. Voldemort's face wasn't poking out of the back of Lucius' like it had with Quirrell. It seemed as though this possession was a bit more...active. The cold, snake-like face was where it should have been, and Lucius' nose had apparently melted into the rest of his head. In fact, the only real sign that it had been Lucius Malfoy at all was the man's long, blonde hair, which looked decidedly out of place framing Voldemort's face. He also looked younger than Harry remembered him. In stark contrast to how he had looked the previous year, at the Citadel of Azkaban, Voldemort now looked more like the part of himself that Harry had battled in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Welcome!" Voldemort greeted, his silky voice still the only sound in the air. "I have been expecting you for some time, Harry."

"Wagner?" Harry murmured, his gaze locked onto Voldemort's.

"Yes, Harry?" Wagner said, eyes shifting to the side.

"Kill them."

A smirk crossing Wagner's face, he raised his wand into the air and, in a deep-voiced roar, he cried out, "ATTACK!"

That was all it took. Harry saw his friends shoot past him alongside the undead soldiers from Ur'terash. He heard the firing and countering of spells begin to clash in the air. He could feel the magic crackling from all corners of the battlefield. But none of it mattered. The only thing he had to pay attention to now was Voldemort. And, presently, Voldemort was calmly walking in a straight line toward Harry. Every so often, his wand arm shot out for the briefest of moments, throwing anyone in his path, be they friend or foe, out of his way. Clearly, the Dark Lord was as focused on Harry as Harry was on him.

"I daresay this has been a long time coming." Voldemort said, coming to a halt a few feet away from Harry. "But I must know - why have you come unprepared? Do you think that your insignificant little army can stop me? Do you truly believe you can stop me from achieving the destiny I have crafted for myself? Do you not understand what you're--"

Voldemort was sent spinning to the ground, a still-steaming spike driven through his left shoulder. Harry watched the fallen wizard, his wand shifting from the tilted-upward position he had moved it to as Voldemort had spoke. He wasn't here to talk, and he hoped that showing that to Voldemort would get the point across more easily than saying it outright would. He didn't expect his bolt to do that much damage, as he was wholly sure the Dark Lord was capable of healing an injury of that caliber. And, sure enough, Voldemort slowly got back to his feet, his expression far less welcoming than it had been.

Sneering down at the cooling spike, he reached up. And, with his bare hand, he grabbed hold of the tail end of the bolt, pulling it back out of his body. There was a sickening, squelching noise as it was slowly moved back through flesh and muscle. Blood poured freely from the hole that was left behind as the red-stained bolt was thrown to the ground. Bringing his wand up, Voldemort murmured a soft, quick succession of spells. As expected, he was able to heal himself up from the attack. But Harry's point had reached him. That, at least, was good.

"Really, Harry. Attacking when your opponent isn't prepared. Is that the way you've been brought up?" Asked Voldemort, his tone icy. "Very well. Then let us cut straight to the chase. It is, as they say, you or me. And, I am quite afraid to tell you... you won't be leaving this place alive. Undead, perhaps, if I can manage to gain dominance over your own immense pool of magic. But if you think I plan to kill you quickly just because I allow myself to be polite around you, you're sorely mistaken. You will watch as your friends are tortured and killed and brought back. I may even let them be the ones to kill you, if I am feeling generous that particular day."

Sighing, Harry closed his eyes. "Well, then. If I'm to be killed, will you allow me one last request?"

Eyes narrowing slightly, Voldemort askd, "And what might that be?"

"Do shut up." Harry hissed.

Balthazar strode quickly across the clock tower toward the first large gear, rapping it with his knuckles. The gear let out a final, almighty groan before crumbling into dust. A green stream of magic, glowing almost white, burst forth, slamming into the twin gear on the opposite wall. The other gear, unable to withstand the pounding from the magic, also shattered, allowing the magic to complete the first circuit.

Eyes opening again, Harry vanished from sight. Voldemort's grin returned at this, and he aimed his wand over his left shoulder just as Harry reappeared. The spell Harry had loosed bounced harmlessly off of Voldemort's shield. This was fine. Harry's body suddenly seemed to melt into light itself before dissipating. A split second later, on the other side of Voldemort, the real Harry appeared. Firing the most powerful cleaving hex he could, Voldemort was only just able to propel himself backwards and out of its way.

Voldemort growled out a series of spells of his own, none of which managed to come into contact with Harry, who was shifting around the encampment as though the magical currents were working. This irritated Voldemort to no end. Though he could easily work around the boy's teleporting, he had severed those currents for a reason.

The only explanations were either that Harry was repairing the currents manually as he travelled, using only enough magic to fix them for an instant... or that he was just brute forcing his way through them.

Either way, Voldemort knew that both options presented him with opportunities. Were the former true, Harry was burning an incredible amount of magic with each jump he made, and was having to at least keep partial focus on the currents. Were the latter true, his body was taking the full brunt of the damage, and he would inevitably begin causing internal injuries soon enough.

Chuckling, Voldemort whirled around as Harry appeared directly behind him. Their wands were aimed straight at each other's heads, barely a few inches away from their targets.

"Surely you don't think this light show can impress me." Voldemort purred.

"Surely you don't think I'm the real Harry." Came the reply, seconds before he vanished into thin air, leaving nothing but a wand behind.

Voldemort's eyes shifted to the side as Harry appeared behind him again. And though he wasn't able to see it first hand, Voldemort knew that Harry still was holding both of his own wands. He didn't see it, but he felt it. All three wands fired their spells at the same time, and all three spells connected with his body. Snarling, he was quick to get back to his feet. The one aimed at his head had been easily avoided, as he had been able to start throwing himself to the side. But the other two had carved into his back.

This time, however, Harry wasn't going to give Voldemort the chance to heal. The wand that had shot Voldemort in the head twirled in the air for a moment before fading out. Harry rushed toward the bleeding Dark Lord, wands aimed for the man's ankles. Planting his feet, Harry quickly jerked the wands up and roared, "SECTUMSEMPRA!"

Voldemort's back was once more carved into, sending him off balance, but not back to the ground. He was hunched over now, a shield spell firmly in place. His robes were tattered and coated in

blood. Teeth gritted, he hissed, "I gave you every chance to join me, Harry... and this is how you respond?!"

"Why would I ever want to join you?" Asked Harry. "You killed my parents, killed my friends, have been a constant source of pain and misery... no sane man would join you."

"And that is why I am so confused. You are NOT a sane man!" Snapped Voldemort. And, in the few quick seconds between the time his arm moved and when his shield actually vanished, he mended his back up. Standing up straight and shifting his shoulders about to ensure he hadn't missed any places, the Dark Lord glared at Harry. "Come now, Harry... you know of what I speak. Let me see it for myself once more..."

But Harry simply stayed where he was, his expression not changing for a moment. "If that's what you came to this fight expecting, you're in for disappointment. Now stop trying to talk me to death and fight!"

A twitch developed in Voldemort's eyes, which narrowed to slits. "No one speaks like that to the Dark Lord, boy. I think it's time you learned your true place in this world!"

Harry was only just able to process the fact that Voldemort had apparated when the attack came. He tried to shift to get away from it, but even that was too slow. He was sent flying across the encampment by Voldemort's spell. Wincing, but uninjured save for a few scrapes and bruises, Harry got back up. Well, he thought, noting just how far he had been sent flying, the Felix seemed to be working at least marginally well. He hadn't snapped anything upon landing, anyway. And he had successfully knocked Voldemort down twice and nearly did so a third time. He had also been successful at angering Voldemort to the point where he played seriously. This was what Harry had been wanting.

As Voldemort slowly walked toward him, Harry allowed himself a moment to glance around. Wagner himself was leading a group against the giants. One had already fallen, and the other two looked to be in fairly bad shape. Tonks and Pansy were leading a small group against the manticores, which were doing very poorly for

themselves. The dragon was still locked down, and Ur'terash's fighters were stopping anyone who tried to get near it. This was good. They clearly had the upper hand here. The werewolves, if that was truly what they were, had been going down like flies being swatted from the air. The vampires, however, were causing problems second only to the giants.

Eyes focusing back in on Voldemort, Harry smirked.

The dim roar of the magic swirling overhead, Balthazar walked over to the second major gear on the wall. There was a large, wide crack down one side, and magic had been spraying wildly out of it for some time. A grin splitting his face, he pulled a hand back and, balling it into a fist, punched the old gear as hard as he could. Like the first, this one let out a groan before shattering into a fine dust. Spiralling out, the magic from this gear split into three parts. Instead of going straight across the room and destroying its twin like the first had, this one slammed into three separate gears at various levels on the opposite wall. The gears couldn't survive against the power of the split stream and crumbled, allowing the second circuit to be completed.

A green light flashed through Harry's eyes. Smiling suddenly, Harry took off as fast as he could toward Voldemort. The Dark Lord hadn't expected a straight-up frontal assault without any form of teleportation involved. Cocking a pale eyebrow, Voldemort raised his wand to conjure the strongest shield he could. Though he wasn't afraid of anything Harry could throw at him, he didn't like what Harry was doing. Most likely, he would shift at the last moment and appear in three places at once.

This, however, was not what Harry had in mind. The surge of power and the Felix coursing through him gave him a simple idea - charge straight at Voldemort. The Dark Lord wouldn't know what to make of this after his earlier use of the Patronus Armor and his light clones, and would most likely put up a defense to stop just such an attack. It was one that would never come, as Harry leapt straight at Voldemort. As he wasn't using any kind of magic, he wasn't stopped by the shield. And, once he had landed in front of Voldemort, the Dark Lord was too surprised by his actions that he was unable to block. Still in the

squatting position he had landed in, Harry's wands raised up toward Voldemort's head. And, not even looking to ensure he was aiming correctly, Harry quietly muttered, "Argentum Incendia."

Spouts of silver fire erupted from the tips of Harry's wands, engulfing the Dark Lord's upper body and head. Letting out a pained howl, Voldemort stumbled quickly away from where he had been standing, his wand moving rapidly as he put the flames out and healed the damage to his charred flesh. So consumed by healing was he that he never noticed Harry rushing for him again. And, crossing his arms in front of himself, Harry followed up with another twin Sectumsempra. This one, like the first he had thrown, connected with the Dark Lord, who was flung back violently as they crashed into his body..

Suddenly, a familiar voice let out a terrified scream. Unable to stop himself, Harry's head jerked to the right. Solieyu was on the ground a short distance away, unable to get himself back to his feet. A pack of men in deep grey robes had ahold of Luna. Eyes narrowing, Harry shifted across the battlefield and, dropping just in front of his friend, he managed to yank her out of the vampires' grasps. Giving her a quick shove out of the way, Harry then snarled, "IGENUS REGNUM!"

His body was encased in light seconds before the group of vampires were, as well. Seconds later, the sphere's glow intensified and it began emanating a huge amount of heat. Though the men trapped inside screamed as they were burned alive, it quickly ended along with their lives. Dropping the spell and the Armor, Harry turned around.

"Are you two alright?!"

Luna had helped Solieyu to his feet and was shaking slightly. "Thank you, Harry..."

"Leon? You good to go?" Harry asked.

"As well as I can be..." Spat Solieyu. "I'm so damned useless like this..."

Harry smirked, walking over and putting a hand on Solieyu's shoulder. "There'll be plenty of time for brow-beating later. Get out there and claw them apart!"

Solieyu looked up at Harry for a moment before shaking his head and returning the smirk. "You're a terrible leader. Go on, get back to your fight and we'll get back to ours."

"You gonna be alright, Luna?" Harry asked.

Nodding, the blonde smiled apologetically. "Sorry for distracting you."

"It isn't a distraction when lives are involved." Harry said.

"Go on. We'll get back to work. You finish him off. Seems like you're doing well so far." Solieyu said, stepping past Harry.

"Good luck." Luna said, smiling.

A burst of blood red light ripped through the air at that moment, slamming into Luna's back. There was a brief moment as the girl's eyes widened before the light tore its way back out through the front of her body. The light vanished, replaced by actual blood spraying from the wound as the blonde dropped first to her knees, then over in a crumpled heap.

Harry stared down at the girl, barely hearing Solieyu shriek Luna's name. The world around him seemed to fade out. The only ones in this dark abyss were his two friends and the one who had cast the spell. Harry turned his head slowly and saw Voldemort, on his feet, a dark grin stretched across his pallid face. And just like that, the world came instantly rushing back in. The sounds of combat drowned out Solieyu's cries for Luna to say something. He was silenced a moment later when the girl, her voice somehow carrying over the sounds of people being slaughtered, replied to his pleading. It was such a simple thing that she requested before the light slipped from her eyes. Her mouth barely opening, she had uttered one word.

"Win."

And, as Solieyu's panicked voice grew even more frantic as the body in his arms became lifeless, Harry turned to face the Dark Lord. His legs feeling like they were made of lead, he began walking toward Voldemort. Arms raising out to the sides of his body, he let go of his wands. But, instead of falling, they began to spin in the air, just outside his palms. And, as they spun, more of them began to fade in, appearing in straight lines on either side of him.

Standing in front of the third and final gear, Balthazar blew out a shaky breath. It was such a great toll on the boy, but it had to be done. Grabbing two of the lower teeth on the gear, the young manifestation of the old man suddenly pulled the device off the wall and flung it across the room. The far wall, already battered from the full force of Harry's power the previous time, shattered almost instantly. And, with one wall of the clock tower fallen, the rest quickly followed. As the magic washed over Balthazar, he closed his eyes. They would grant Luna Lovegood's final request.

Even if it drove Harry insane.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: The clock tower falls to ruin as time runs out for Luna. The only question now is whether Harry will be able to withstand the punishment of casting the *Lucidus Susceptor*. I have nothing further to add.

I'll see you next time.

## Chapter 21 – Lucidus Susceptor

Eyes narrowed to slits, Harry started walking toward Voldemort. His arms still outstretched, his wands still twirling madly, the power flowing through him was...indescribable. It was so much more than it had been the night Balthazar had caused him to attack Wagner. He was fully in control here. The world almost seemed to be moving slower for him. He was able to look around and take note of everything else happening in the fight. The dragon was keeping Wagner pinned down, though the lich didn't look to be in any immediate trouble. The vampires had fled when their leaders were burned. The werewolves had been the first group to fall in the fight, having no abnormal magical capabilities outside the time directly before and after the full moon.

Voldemort himself looked uncertain, as though the consequence of his actions hadn't yet sunk in. That was fine, Harry thought, his wands speeding up. It didn't matter if Voldemort understood or not. It wasn't his purpose to understand. His only job now was to be ripped back and thrown into the Void for the rest of eternity. This is what he had been waiting for. This is what it all came down to. It was just himself and Voldemort now. He had pushed his luck one time too many. And now there would be no escape for the Dark Lord. A grin split Harry's face and a faint, red mist escaped his lips as he let out a shaky breath.

Raising his wand, Voldemort began to fire curses at Harry. Harry's wands would stop briefly every few seconds to block or deflect the spells cast his way. It all took so little effort now. Voldemort was no longer a threat. But, even as he thought that, Harry knew that it would have been difficult to try this any sooner. Balthazar had clearly been trying to raise his tolerance to his own magic. That was the only way he was able to fully command it now. And somewhere, Harry could feel the pain. His mind was prepared, but his body wasn't as stable. He had longer than a minute, but the exact amount beyond that was unknown to him. Clearly, even at this stage, his body wasn't going to be able to hold under the pressure for too long. He would eventually buckle under it. It was too great a weight. He had to do this and he had to do it quickly.

Coming to a halt, he closed his eyes. And through gritted teeth, he ground out, "Lucidus... Susceptor..."

On the ground under his feet a silver summoning circle appeared. Small at first, it rapidly shot out in all directions, covering the entirety of the clearing that Voldemort's camp occupied. This seemed to bring most of the fighting to an end, as almost everyone looked over to see what the source of the circle was. The other wands evened out, their tips aimed at Voldemort. And then, at the farthest edges of the circle, something began happening. Silvery wisps started to rise from the ground.

As they rose, they took shape. An old woman on one end, a young man at the other. They only took a moment to take in their surroundings before reaching out and taking hold of the wands in front of them. A look of nostalgia crossed their faces for a moment before their expressions steeled. Voldemort tried to kill one of them, but the green stream of light passed through them as though they weren't even there. Harry smirked as an all-too-brief flash of panic and realization crossed the Dark Lord's face. He remembered them now. He remembered the ones he had killed.

One by one, more specters rose from the ground, taking up their wands once more in the fight against Voldemort. Eventually, the Dark Lord decided it would be best to ignore the ghosts and take a direct shot at Harry. But he was casting sloppily now, and Harry easily ducked out of the way. Almost all of the wands had their owners back now, though some were taking longer than others to hear the call to arms. Harry was only dimly aware of how many had arrived on either side of him. The only thing that got Harry to break his gaze away from Voldemort was a new wand being thrown next to him. It had come from somewhere behind him, and came to a halt a few inches above the ground. It stayed there for a few seconds before rising up, shakily, until it was level with the others. Its owner quickly appeared.

A few moments later, when the last of the stragglers had arrived, Harry turned his head to the right. And, smiling sadly, he whispered, "Well, that's all of them. You didn't have to stay, you know. And..."

A silvery finger came to rest over his lips. A moment later, it was pulled back. Harry frowned at the spectral form of Luna Lovegood, but said nothing. He knew what she meant. He would have time to browbeat himself for her death later. He had to focus for now. Giving the girl a forced grin, turning to look back at Voldemort, who decidedly looked on-edge now.

"Well, Tom... I guess this is it, isn't it?" Harry asked, his tone dry. "For all your bravado, you couldn't stand up to me after all."

"Do you think you're going to be able to kill me that easily?" Asked Voldemort.

"Kill you? Tommy, if I killed you, you wouldn't learn anything. Do you think I've come this far just to kill you? Killing is too uncertain. You can get around death. I think you'll find it considerably more difficult to escape what I have planned." Harry said. "You'll have all of eternity to think about this, you know. You'll go mad at some point, and you'll forever be stuck, spinning endlessly in a black, shapeless expanse of nothingness. I'm not going to kill you, Tom. I'm going to torture you."

Twin beams of bright, silver light erupted from the wands of the two ghosts at either end of the summoning circle. And, one by one, from the outside edges in, more shot out. They crashed into Voldemort's chest, causing him to let out a howl of agony. He tried to escape, but he seemed to be held in place by the light. The lights were connecting, but not going through him. They were, in a way, focusing on one particular point. Harry had to concentrate. He had to keep his head. Now more than ever, this was the one time in his life where he couldn't distract himself with his own self-doubt.

The struggle must have been visible, as suddenly he felt something cold against his cheek. Eyes moving to the side, he saw Luna smiling at him again. She mouthed something, but no words came out. Harry couldn't tell what she had said, either. But he had a good idea of the meaning behind whatever it had been, as she raised her wand at that moment. Hers had been the last. Voldemort was now shrieking in pain and thrashing around as best he could. Harry turned his gaze from his dead friend to the Dark Lord.

He had been the cause of so much pain and suffering. And now it was his turn. Now he would know what that kind of pain could feel like. Raising his wands and putting the tips together, Harry whispered, "Come on, Cedric. Time to get him back for what he did to you."

A huge, white beam of light shot from the tips of the connected wands. Nearly twice the size of the others, it spiraled forward, howling through the air, and ripped through Voldemort's torso. As the Dark Lord's screams became louder, the beam of light seemed to hit an invisible wall some distance behind him. Synchronized pulses shot down the beams of light, tore through Voldemort, and slammed into the invisible wall. Slowly, a dark, circular hole appeared. Its size rapidly expanded until it was twice as tall as Voldemort was.

There was no final exchange between Harry and Voldemort. None was needed now. Slowly, the light began pushing Voldemort back, toward the gaping hole. Weak, futile spells bounced off of the silver and white light. Voldemort wasn't able to save himself this time. Harry kept his eyes locked onto Voldemort's, and he was greatly pleased to see the abject terror in them. The Dark Lord knew he had lost. He knew he was going to float in the Void forever. He knew that his reign had ended.

With a guttural scream, Harry cried out, "NOW!"

A sudden shockwave erupted from the end of the beams of light. This broke Voldemort's body away from the light, shooting him through the air, his body tumbling end over end. When it had passed through the Void's entrance, the portal slammed shut almost instantly. The light from the wands dispersed then, and a strange noise filled the air. Turning his head, Harry looked off to the right of himself. At the far end of the summoning circle, the young man was fading away. On the ground at his feet was his wand, which was now splintered into numerous pieces.

The sound came from the other side, where the old woman and her wand were experiencing the same thing. The summoning circle was shrinking. And, their final tasks done, the ghosts were leaving, their wands breaking from the strain of the Susceptor. But they looked happy now. They had helped to rid the world of the monster that had

stolen their lives. That was enough. That was all they needed. And now they were returning to wherever they had been summoned from.

Harry noticed, for the first time, that the battlefield had gone quiet. He took this to mean that the last few obstacles had been taken care of. And they had. Wagner stood, arms crossed, near the fallen body of the dragon. The manticores were piled next to a stack of dead, humanoid bodies. The giants had been toppled, taking out huge chunks of the forest with them. Blood stained the snow pink, and the smell of death in the air was unmistakable. But none of that mattered now. They had emerged victorious.

Wands cracked left and right as the summoning circle got smaller and smaller. Harry turned and looked at Luna again, a strange look in his eyes. Luna frowned as she saw him. She tried to ask a question, but once more, her voice didn't carry. Over and over, she tried to speak out loud, but it was no use. Looking frustrated, she reached out and put her hand onto Harry's cheek. She tried desperately to communicate without words what she was trying to ask. But Harry never gave her an answer.

It seemed, as the circle on the ground retracted, that everyone finally was able to take in the situation. That was when the cheers and victorious laughter began to fill the silence. Solieyu, seated on the ground next to Luna's body, called out to her. When she looked over at him, it was with something akin to fear in her eyes.

"Don't worry," Solieyu said, leaning back on his arms. "I'll get there before you do. I know the way. So don't get lost, okay? I can lead you to where you should be."

Luna shook her head at that, mouthing something and pointing at Harry. Solieyu frowned at this. Harry was still facing away from him and everyone else, and he didn't have the energy to get up off the ground. Whatever was troubling her, he would have to find out on the other side. The summoning circle had almost disappeared now, and Luna's body vanished as it shrank. With a quiet sigh, Solieyu let himself lay down. Turning his head to look at Luna's body, he whispered, "This isn't how it was supposed to end. Was it?"

His eyes closed, then, and he put a shaking hand over one of Luna's. And, for a brief moment, he felt a twinge of pain in his chest. He could feel it. For the first time, he could properly feel something. Why did it have to be now, though? Why was Luna's cold, lifeless hand the first and last thing he had to feel as one of the undead? Blowing out a weak sigh, he murmured, "Gotta be quick. She'll be lonely..."

Some distance away, Malfoy was shambling up toward Harry. He had had his right leg pierced by some curse or another. It hurt like the devil, but the adrenaline was helping him ignore the pain. When he got close enough, he called out, "What're you standing around for, Potter? Come on, get over here! I think the vampire's..."

He was silenced as Harry shifted his weight, looking over his shoulder. There, in his eyes, was an unmistakably psychotic look. A wide, crazed grin split Harry's face and, when the summoning circle vanished, Harry did as well.

Malfoy halted in his tracks, staring wide-eyed at the spot Harry had just been. His mouth moved, but no sound came out. What did that mean? Hadn't he figured out a way to change the spell?! Why the hell had he disappeared?! Whatever adrenaline had been pumping through his body seemed to run out at that moment. His leg buckled and he dropped to the ground. Somewhere from behind him, he could hear Tonks' screaming. Pansy had rushed up and was asking him something, but her words sounded muddled.

Harry had done his job. He had rid the world of Voldemort. And, in the process, he had apparently rid the world of himself, as well. There was no trace of him left at all, not even a fragment of the Gauntlet. His wands hadn't snapped like those of the ghosts, but... that didn't necessarily mean anything, did it? Eyes narrowing, Malfoy pushed himself back to his feet, slowly walking over toward the spot Harry had been occupying. As he drew near, he could feel the air around him changing, as though a large amount of static electricity had built up.

"Damn you, you were supposed to live. Did you feel the insanity taking over and make a last second change?" Muttered the Slytherin, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Who's going to look out for your

woman now? She just lost you, Lovegood, and the vampire again. Idiot..."

"Draco?" Pansy said, her voice nearly a whisper as she stepped up beside the blond. "Is...?"

"It certainly seems that way. If he isn't dead, he's managed to learn to hide the aura he's been giving off lately. That much magic, anyone could sense him around." Malfoy spat.

"I can't feel anything..." Pansy said, hugging herself. "I thought he..."

"He had." Malfoy interrupted. Exhaling sharply through his nose, he turned. "Come on."

"Draco? What are...?"

"There are people that need rounding up. We didn't escape this without casualties. Those who did leave themselves behind to be buried need to be assembled. The ones we killed or captured need to be handled as well. We need to get a letter off to Dumbledore, informing him of what's taken place here." Malfoy explained, his voice dropping to a snarl. "Potter may not be here to do it, but by god, I'll rub this victory in the old man's face until he admits he was wrong!"

Pansy bit her lip, watching Malfoy storm across the battlefield to speak with Wagner. Turning, she decided to go help Tonks out. The poor girl had dropped to her knees and was staring, wide-eyed, at the spot Harry had been. "Shock?" Murmured Pansy to herself. She wasn't doing much better. It was only through Malfoy's anger that she was able to function. Hopefully, his emotions would hold up for the next few days. Things weren't going to even start getting better until after the funerals had been held.

Kneeling next to Tonks, Pansy paused only for a moment before pulling the girl into a tight embrace. Tonks was shaking even more violently than she was, which wasn't good at all. Letting out a choked sort of noise, Tonks finally broke down into tears, clutching at Pansy's robes. Gritting her teeth, Pansy had to force herself not to join the Ravenclaw. Tonks needed someone more than Pansy did at that

moment, and the options were very limited. She could grieve later. She had to help Tonks get hers out of the way first.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Remus Lupin wasn't happy to be back in the city of the undead. But he had been requested to come back. He was, after all, the only one left who could properly return on his own. A letter had come two days prior, explaining what had taken place during the battle with Voldemort. It had come unexpectedly and had led to a great deal of grief and celebration both. Stepping through the door at the end of the hall, Lupin entered the throne room. Multiple pairs of eyes looked up to greet him, though no one vocalized anything.

Wagner sat on his throne, staring down at the three coffins a few feet away. Malfoy, Pansy, and Tonks were sitting at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the lich king's seat, looking all but lost. Walking over, Lupin let out a low sigh. This would make five bodies he would be returning to Britain.

"Thank you for coming." Wagner said, his voice quiet.

Lupin nodded slightly, glancing up at the man. "Thank you for leading the assault."

"That was Harry's doing." Corrected Wagner. "I was there to assist."

Smiling weakly, Lupin turned his gaze at the teens. "How are you three holding up?"

"About as well as can be expected, given the circumstances." Malfoy murmured, leaning back on his arms. "We're all ready to go home and get the unpleasantries over with. Assuming we're welcome to return, of course."

"Given the circumstances," Echoed a quiet voice from the hall, "You are all welcome to return..."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed to slits as Albus Dumbledore stepped into the throne room. Behind him, still looking wary of being in such a place,

were Andromeda Tonks, Narcissa Malfoy, and Professor Flitwick. Rushing toward each other, the Tonks women embraced and, almost immediately, began to cry. Professor Flitwick wasn't looking very well, either, after spotting the coffins. He walked over to them and, with a shaky hand, gently touched each one, whispering a 'Well done...' to them.

Narcissa walked over to her son and Pansy, who both stood as she drew near. Looking conflicted for only a moment, the elder Malfoy then stepped forward, wrapping her arms around the both of them. She had no congratulatory words, as she knew they were all but meaningless given the situation. But her son was still alive. And Pansy, who may as well have been her daughter for all the time she had spent at Malfoy Manor, had also escaped death.

Malfoy seemed almost taken aback by his mother's sudden burst of emotion, but said nothing. Eyes closing, he merely leaned into the embrace as Pansy began to sniffle. He reached over, sighing, and started rubbing at her back.

Watching the pained reunions taking place, Dumbledore turned to look at Wagner, who had moved down from his throne. "It seems," Said the headmaster, "that I have you to thank for taking care of those a foolish old man like myself had driven away."

"Even the best of us make mistakes." Wagner said.

"With so many lives on the line, I did not have the right to make such a mistake." Dumbledore said, his voice somewhat hoarse. "And this is the result. Only a few of the students who left on that day will be returning alive."

"What will you do?" Asked Wagner.

"I think this has shown me something." Said Dumbledore. "I will continue to serve as headmaster for Hogwarts through the end of term. After that, however, I will be stepping down from that position. I should not be seen as anything but a coward for my hesitation in this war. Nor would I wish to be."

"It seems you're taking this very hard. I've only heard about what happened from Harry." Wagner said.

"I can imagine what he said of me. I can also imagine it to be quite true. If I had acted sooner, perhaps we could have averted such tragedy." Dumbledore said, bowing his head and closing his eyes.

"The only thing you can do is move forward." Wagner said. "From one old man to another, you should try not to think too hard on the matter. I know you feel responsible, and perhaps you are. But that is not for me to decide. Your actions from this point forward will show whether or not you truly regret what has taken place."

"And so they will." Dumbledore said, turning to look at the coffins. Flitwick was still pacing near them, seemingly lost in thought. "They will come home to a hero's welcome. A great crisis has been averted here, grave though the outcome was anyway. I know they do not wish it. I will be doing everything in my power to keep them out of the spotlight, as they say."

"Will you all be leaving right away?" Asked Wagner.

"I believe we will, yes." Dumbledore said. "It will still take a bit of time to return home, but that is quite alright. It will give the children ample time to get some well-deserved accusations off of their chests." With a sigh, he continued, "I have failed them. I grew too frightened and because of that..."

"I'm sure it didn't help that I sent Harry to essentially attack you." Wagner said. "The hourglass has proved very useful to us, but..."

"I do not fault you for that." Dumbledore said, a ghost of a smile on his face. "Though I will bear the scar from its extraction for the rest of my life. Perhaps as a reminder to never let things get that far out of control again."

Nodding slowly, Wagner extended a skeletal hand. "I wish you luck, then, Albus Dumbledore. You have a long, uphill battle to face. With time, I hope you are capable of seeing the other side of that hill."

"As am I." Dumbledore replied, taking Wagner's hand and shaking it.  
"As am I."

Across the room, Narcissa had conjured a chair near the steps leading up to the throne and had been talking to her son and Pansy. She was quite happy that Lucius and Voldemort both had been removed from the world, though she lamented at the high price of that removal. She and Pansy talked back and forth a little. Malfoy, however, was paying very little attention. His eyes were focused on someone a short distance away. There was something nagging him, and he knew it wouldn't leave until he got it out of his system. Pushing himself up, ignoring the questions from the two women near him, Malfoy walked over to Dumbledore. The headmaster's gaze turned his way as soon as he noticed.

"So, you come sauntering in after the fact, thinking you can just lay everything to rest. You think that it's over and that all grudges can be forgotten. You think that apologizing and trying to do what's best is the way to go. You stand there in your arrogance and think that you can make all of this right?!" Snarled the blond, eyes narrowed. "How dare you even show your face! Had you gotten off of your useless ass and helped from the start, how many lives would have been saved?!"

"Draco!" Cried Narcissa. "What are you...?!"

"This bastard is the reason they're dead." Malfoy hissed. "It all comes back to him! Every single bit of it! It's because of him we had to come here by ourselves! His desire to sit and do nothing has gotten them killed! The few real friends I've ever had and now where are they?! Everyone else may forgive you, old man. But I never will. Because he wouldn't, either. And since he's gone, someone needs to carry the hatred for him. Someone has to be there who knew what really took place. Because you're going to sugar-coat every bloody part of it to the media. That's exactly the kind of person you are, isn't it? Lying your way to peace and praying it lasts. Sitting in your room while others go and get killed for you. And now you're here. And you've come to collect us, like we were your possessions. The only reason I plan to return to that school is to gather my things."

"And what of your education?" Asked Dumbledore in an even tone.

"What of my education?" Malfoy replied. "I was here when he stopped Voldemort. I was here when he left. I watched him vanish. He wouldn't have returned. So neither will I. There's nothing left for me there. I daresay all of us here could pass the final exams with flying colors without even trying. He left some things behind. He needs those taken care of."

"Draco?" Pansy said, getting up and slowly walking over. Malfoy was shaking quite violently now, and he was talking through gritted teeth. It had been a long time since she had seen him that angry. "Are you..."

Dumbledore lowered his head slightly as Pansy stared at Malfoy. "I cannot set things right. I do not intend to, Mr. Malfoy. The media, as you put it, will know the true story. I will not deny a true hero his due. As I have already mentioned to Mr. Wagner, I also plan to step down as the headmaster of Hogwarts effective at the end of this term. Doing so now would only cause unneeded questioning. I cannot set things right, no. But I will not try and make them any worse. I have done enough damage."

Pansy put her hand on Malfoy's back. "Come on, Draco. Come sit back down..."

Jerking away from the girl, Malfoy turned and crossed the room swiftly, hands in his pockets. Not caring that he had a couple of people calling after him, he vanished down one of the long, dark corridors leading out of the throne room. He didn't particularly care where he was going, as it didn't matter. He just needed to get away from Dumbledore. Had he stayed, he would have ended up attacking the man. Everyone else might have believed the old man's sob story, but he wouldn't. He couldn't. Not after witnessing everything else. Malfoy wasn't as stupid or gullible as Dumbledore seemed to think he was.

Ducking into an unused room, Malfoy leaned back against the closed door. Raising a hand, he put it over his heart, which was racing. Damn it all, what had caused it to end this way? Malfoy wasn't the

one everyone would be celebrating, so why did he have to go listen to them? They would stand around, laughing and dancing as though everything was alright. Letting his head thump back against the door, Malfoy gazed up at the ceiling.

"This is all your fault, you idiot." He murmured. "What happened that caused you to change your plans? We could have dealt with it. You'd won... Wagner could have cut your arm off then and there! This isn't fair to anyone! Who the hell am I supposed to fight with now? You told me that after you had gotten that damned parasitic thing off of your arm, we could have a proper duel again."

Blowing out a long, quiet breath, Malfoy closed his eyes. It had been a long time since he had been so upset over anything. He had forgotten what it was like. He had forgotten how much he hated getting this way. But he had to. He had to because the real hero of the war wouldn't get a chance to again. Thinking about it, he scoffed.

His hand moving from his chest to his eyes, he whispered, "You're not a hero. You're nothing but a fucking liar, Harry."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: The final battle is over and the survivors will be heading home soon. But their return will not be a happy one, despite those around them trying to keep them cheered up. In the end, the cost was too great for the victory given.

There are two chapters left. Or, perhaps, one full chapter and an epilogue. It really depends on what I can work in. This chapter ends slightly before where I was planning it to due to Malfoy's breakdown. Breakdown... is that the word I want? Perhaps... revelation. He discovered something that day, and it wasn't something he liked.

Next time, everyone comes home and the dead can finally be laid to rest.

## Chapter 22 – I Am Not Here, I Do Not Sleep

When everyone arrived back at the Burrow, it was to a waiting crowd. Tonks immediately rushed over to Hermione and Ginny, Pansy following behind at a slower pace. As she joined them, Pansy cast a worried look over her shoulder at Malfoy, who had said very little since his outburst against Dumbledore. She never would have thought that he, of all people, would be taking Harry's death so hard. As she joined the other girls in a hug, she closed her eyes. It was almost over. Despite the fact that only a few days ago they had destroyed Voldemort's forces, it felt as though the hardest was yet to come.

Both Maria Reinhardt and Xenophilius Lovegood were also present, with Maria looking far worse than Xeno was. Dumbledore approached them and spoke quietly with them for awhile, putting a comforting hand on Maria's shoulder when she ducked her head. Mrs. Weasley seemed to be having a bit of a fit at the sight of even more coffins. Malfoy tried to block all of the noise out. Glancing around the rundown yard, he picked a direction and set off walking. He didn't stop until he was far enough away that he couldn't hear the commotion.

As it turned out, there was a small pond near where he stopped. Deciding to sit at the water's edge, he headed over for it. Sitting back on the small slope that lead down to it, he sighed quietly. This wasn't right. This wasn't how victory was supposed to feel. This was...

"You alright?"

Malfoy turned his head slightly, seeing Pansy walking toward him. Moving to stare blankly at the pond, he replied, "Define 'alright.'"

Sitting next to the blond, Pansy put her arm around him. "You know precisely what I mean. What's up, Draco? Talk to me..."

"This wasn't how our homecoming should have gone." Malfoy stated, eyes half closing.

"Yeah... just doesn't feel right without all of us, does it?" Pansy said, leaning her head against Malfoy's shoulder. "It's probably for the best

that we aren't returning to Hogwarts for any length of time. Right? The Pit would be too quiet. Poor Tonks, though... she's had nightmares ever since then. Poor thing's barely gotten any sleep at all."

"It's no surprise." Malfoy murmured. "I suppose I was lucky. I survived and so did you. Everyone else seems to have lost someone they care about."

Smiling sadly, Pansy replied, "You shouldn't try to hide it like that, Draco."

"Hide what?" Asked the blond.

"That we didn't lose people we care about." Pansy said.

"You may have. I didn't." Malfoy corrected. "The vampire and Lovegood are probably together again, somewhere out there. The Weasley twins died together. If Tonks had died alongside Harry, we would have an even amount of pairs."

"You're calling him 'Harry' now." Pansy said, her voice quiet.

"Huh?"

"Ever since we left Ur'terash. Any time you've talked about him, you've called him by his first name. You never did that before." Pansy said.

"Am I?" Malfoy asked, still staring forward at the calm surface of the pond.

"You miss him as much as we do. Don't you?"

"Don't be stupid."

"It may have been different from the rest of us, but you still cared about him. Whenever he started to go a little mad, you seemed to step in and snap him back to his senses more than anyone else. Even way back when you first jumped ship to his side. Remember

when he first started working on the Patronus Armor? You were the one who tried snapping him back to normal." Pansy explained. "You cared about him, Draco, whether you admit it or not."

Malfoy shifted his weight then, and Pansy could feel how tense his muscles had gotten. Brow creasing for a moment, she started to realize something. "Draco?"

"What?"

"...Stop."

Malfoy cast an annoyed glance at her. "Stop what?"

"Stop holding back." Pansy said, shifting around so that she could face him better. "You haven't given yourself time to grieve yet, have you? ...Is that why you came out here?"

"Holding back." Malfoy repeated, looking off to the side to avoid Pansy's gaze. "Is that what you think this is about, Pansy? Me not breaking down into tears like the rest of you over what's happened?"

"I think it is." Pansy said. "Aside from yelling at Dumbledore, you've really not done any grieving that I've seen. That isn't healthy. You were friends with them. It's only natural to mourn their passing, isn't it?"

"I don't cry." Malfoy said, leaning back on his arms.

Pansy's expression suddenly shifted from one of concern to one of irritation. Putting a hand on Malfoy's chest, she gripped at his robes and hefted him back upright to glare at him. "Draco Malfoy, don't you even try passing that off as the truth to me! I spent more time at your house than my own when we were growing up and you bawled your stupid head off all the time! Every time you scraped your knee or lost a toy or didn't get some schooling just right, that's all it was - nothing but blubbering from you! It wasn't until a few years before Hogwarts that your idiot father started to 'mold' you into the whole 'don't cry' nonsense! And by now, you should know that every damned thing

that man said was a complete lie, so don't you dare try to pass that off as your excuse! It won't work on me, Draco!"

Blinking owlishly at the outburst, Malfoy then scowled. "I didn't blubber."

"Oh the hell you didn't!" Snapped Pansy. "'Ooh, Dobby, my broom hit the wall and broke in two! What am I going to dooooo a bloo blah bloo bloo!'"

Malfoy glared at the girl. "I did not say 'a bloo blah bloo bloo'!"

"Oh yes you did! You sat right there on the floor, holding your toy broom, and blubbered!" Pansy stated.

"Your memory is faulty." Malfoy declared. "I don't remember that at all."

"Of course you don't. You've probably blocked any moments of perceived weakness out of your damn mind! It's just you and me here, Draco. Who the hell do you think you're kidding? The longer you hold it in, the worse it's going to be! I already told the girls to make sure no one came looking for us, so no one's going to see you be human, if that's what you're worried about!" Pansy said, tightening her grip on Malfoy's robes.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, then." Malfoy said, his voice almost a monotone. Leaning back once more, despite Pansy's indignant cry when she was pulled over as well, he continued, "Am I upset? Yes. Am I pissed off? Of course. Am I going to cry about it? No. Why? Because it serves no bloody purpose. Nothing will change because I had a good angst."

"You're wrong." Pansy said, not bothering to sit back up. "You'll get it out of your system. You'll be thinking about it until you do."

"And how are you so sure about that, Pansy? If it hasn't become obvious by now, I'm not the same person I was when we were both children." Malfoy said, moving aside, sitting back up, and leaning forward against his knees. "Someone has to face the world for him in

his absence. I doubt Tonks would want that duty. I have to be strong to pick up the slack he left in his wake. All the loose ends need tying up and I'm the one that's going to have to do that."

"Is that what this is really about? Some sense of duty to Harry?" Pansy asked.

"You could call it that, I suppose." Malfoy muttered. Blowing out another sigh, he wrapped his arms around his legs. "Not looking forward to the funerals. Harry's is sure to draw a disgusting amount of attention."

Rolling over onto her back, she stared up at Malfoy, who seemed far smaller than he actually was. Harry wasn't around to carry the weight of the world anymore, so Malfoy was apparently attempting to in his stead. She only noticed it because she knew him so well. Sitting up, she smiled as she wrapped her arm back around Malfoy's body and pulled him against her own. Not resisting the move, his head ended up against her shoulder. She squeezed his arm softly as his eyes closed.

Voice shaking only slightly, Malfoy whispered, "This was supposed to be Harry's victory."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

The funerals were held a week later, after the news had been broken to the wizarding world. Though most celebrated the victory over Voldemort, some just couldn't muster the strength to be anything but saddened by the news. Dumbledore had made a public apology for holding back the efforts to stop the Dark Lord and took full responsibility for all of the deaths that occurred because of his hesitation. There was a public outcry over this, with multiple sides all fighting amongst one another as to who was really at fault. Dumbledore knew of the arguing factions but felt it best to let them work it out on their own. He was in no position, he felt, to decide it for them.

The media had been thankfully minimal on everyone but Harry's funeral. Dumbledore, however, made sure that all of the reporters

and onlookers were kept at a far enough distance that they wouldn't interrupt the ceremony. Harry was being laid to rest in Godric's Hollow, alongside his parents. It was a suitably dreary day, with dark clouds overhead threatening to drench everyone down below. The weather, some at the funeral would have claimed, was merely matching how they all felt.

Malfoy stared at Harry's tombstone, which simply bore his name and the span of his life, through narrowed eyes. He didn't want to be there. This didn't feel right. He couldn't place why, but it didn't feel right. All around him throughout the two hour service, people would break down into tears, stop, and start up again later. All around him throughout the two hour service were those too weak to accept what had happened. When Dumbledore was wrapping things up and the casket was lowered into the ground, Malfoy got to his feet.

Through clenched teeth, he hissed quietly, "Come and show yourself, you bastard."

His hands balled into fists when nothing happened. Pansy, watching from her seat next to him, reached out and grabbed his sleeve. But Malfoy's eyes remained on Harry's tombstone, as though the stone itself was mocking him.

"The longer I think about it, the more insipid it sounds to think you're dead, you smug bastard. You probably ended up halfway around the world due to shoddy planning. You're going to show up months from now, apologizing and acting as if life can just pick up where you left it off! I'm not spending my year waiting for you!" Snarled Malfoy, causing all eyes present to look his way.

"Draco!" Whispered Pansy, fiercely. "Stop! What are you..."

"I KNOW YOU'RE HERE, DAMN IT! STOP HIDING AND SHOW YOURSELF!" Malfoy screamed.

A strange, sharp cracking noise filled the silence following the Slytherin's outburst. Heads turned from the blond to the tombstone, which had been cracked. The line split directly through Harry's date of

death, making it illegible. Jerking his arm free of Pansy's grasp, Malfoy stormed up to the grave and drew his wand.

"Oh no you don't. You're not getting away with just that. You're not being cryptic with me, damn it all! I'll hunt you down if you don't show yourself, Potter!" Malfoy snapped, looking around the area. "That was no coincidence. You're shifted and you're watching. Come now, Potter, how stupid do you think we are?!"

The only response he got was the wind picking up for a brief moment. Eyes narrowing further, Malfoy looked down into the grave, which hadn't been covered yet. And, before anyone could stop him, he had taken aim and fired onto the empty coffin at the bottom, splintering it. Putting his wand away, Malfoy turned and walked off, away from the assembled group of Harry's friends. An icy tone to his voice, Malfoy growled, "No point in burying someone who isn't dead."

And, with that, the blond apparated away.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

It was nearly a month before Malfoy turned up again. When he returned, it was to no fanfare or excitement. He simply reappeared in the Great Hall one day. As much as he hated having to return to the school, he knew it beat the alternative. He had spent the month trying to hunt Harry down, to no avail. He also looked as though he had gotten all of an hour's sleep the entire time. No one at the Slytherin table wanted to get anywhere near him for fear of him snapping. He had turned up early in the morning, making the first arrivals uneasy as they entered and noticed him. Most had heard by that point of what he had done at Harry's funeral.

He hadn't kept in contact with anyone during his time away. He hadn't seen the need. They would have only slowed him down. He had wanted to move to all of the places that Harry might have been hiding. He had even taken flight and gone back to the empty Citadel of Azkaban, which still bore the scars of battle. He had searched every room of the place, casting left and right to try and root Harry out. But his searching had drawn nothing, as it did everywhere he had looked. Giving up, he had decided to return to Hogwarts. It was the last place

he wanted to be. But he knew it also had a good chance of being the place that Harry would reappear.

He had been in something of a daze that morning, not really paying attention to anything. He had idly picked at his food, not eating much despite being incredibly hungry. He felt about as well as he looked. He didn't notice people entering or sitting down, and probably would have continued along those lines had he not been elbowed sharply in the side. This successfully broke his stare down at his plate. Raising his head, he saw Pansy sitting next to him, an unsure expression on her face.

His eyes shifted to the left. The others had apparently come with Pansy. And, like her, they didn't look like they knew what to do with him. Gaze returning to Pansy, he mustered a tired smile. "Are they all really that afraid of me exploding again?"

"You did cause a big stir at Harry's funeral, Draco..." Pansy murmured. "Where have you been? We've been worried..."

"Around." Came the simple reply. "So what happened after I left?"

"Well," Pansy began, moving some food onto her plate. "You managed to make Tonks stop crying finally. Dunno whether she felt hope returning or whether she was just pissed off at you spoiling the funeral. But she hasn't cried since. Take that as you will."

Malfoy snorted quietly. "He isn't dead. I know he isn't."

"How? Okay, granted, the thing with his tombstone was weird, I'll give you that. But... how do you know, Draco? Why did you get like this?" Asked Pansy, putting a hand on Malfoy's back.

"You didn't see the look in his eyes before he vanished. I did." Malfoy stated. "He didn't vanish the same way the others did. Let's be honest, Pansy. If he wanted to disappear and fake his own death, that was the time to do it. He would finally get the peace he's wanted all these years. If and when he reappears, it'll probably be some time from now. And he'll probably go to see his fiancee first."

Pansy let out a quiet sigh then. "And what if you're wrong, Draco? What if he really is dead?"

"Then you've all got the right to yell at me until you feel better about it." Malfoy said, shrugging crookedly. "I won't give up on him just yet. Because whether he wants to admit it or not, he's still got work to do."

"Work?"

"Do you think we got rid of all the Death Eaters, Pansy? Because I don't. Voldemort was never the type to not plan out all possibilities. And he was never so egotistical to believe he wouldn't be defeated again. I'm willing to bet he had some kind of contingency plan in place on the off chance that something would happen to him again. He had been stopped once. He came back. Who's to say he won't try it again? Potter didn't kill him, after all. He's still alive. Potter wouldn't just stop there. Not when there's a chance that Voldemort could return. Because Potter thought very much the same way Voldemort did. He also probably had at least one plan in place should Voldemort somehow find a way out of the Void. Potter isn't stupid. But neither is Voldemort." Malfoy explained.

"You... think Voldemort will break out?" Asked Pansy.

"I think it's likely." Malfoy said, nodding. "He was fighting more than one battle that day. The real question is... when Potter does show back up... how much of his sanity will be left?"

Pansy frowned at this, but said nothing.

"I promised him something that day." Malfoy said, his voice quiet. "I told him that should anything happen, and he did lose his sanity... that I would hunt him down and stop him. I have to be prepared to do that, too. I can't sit idly by forever. I can't let my guard down."

"Do you really think he went mad?" Pansy asked.

"Possibly. This whole damned situation has too many variables. Did Potter die or didn't he? If he didn't, is he insane or isn't he? Did he

know the ghost was working against him or not? Did he make plans to combat that if he did know? Did he have a plan in place should Voldemort escape? If he died, does that plan work out how the rest of us are supposed to kill Voldemort in his place? Did Voldemort have an escape plan ready should he fall in Germany? If so, what is it and when will it take place? And more importantly, who's going to helm the project? There's so much here to try and sift through and the only one who can answer any of the questions is currently missing, possibly dead, and more than likely out of his bloody MIND!"

Malfoy was panting, and looked quite miserable by the end of his rant. Pansy rubbed slowly at his back, but it didn't seem to be helping any. Sighing, she asked, "Do you wanna get out of here? You look like you need to rest, Draco."

"I guess. You might have to give me something to force me to sleep, though." Malfoy said, rubbing his forehead slowly. "I haven't gotten a good night's rest in far too long."

Nodding, Pansy got to her feet. "Come on, then." And, her voice a little louder, she called up the table, "Oi, Blaise! Keep everyone outta the dorms for awhile. Or at least make them be quiet. Draco needs to catch up on his sleep!"

Blaise Zabini nodded. "Will do."

Tonks watched as Pansy led Malfoy out of the room. When they were gone, she closed her eyes and blew out a quiet sigh. "And so the wandering son returns."

"And you managed not to beat him up." Ginny added.

"And I managed not to beat him up." Tonks repeated, nodding slowly. "Yeah. I can't do it, though. He's got a crazed look in his eyes. And I want to believe what he's saying."

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a quick glance. The former put her hand on Tonks' back. "Are you sure? If he's wrong..."

"If he's wrong, he's wrong." Tonks said. "But it helps, having something to hold onto like that. It helps me from becoming a stupid, crying wreck again. And you saw what happened. No way that could've been coincidence, right?"

"I'll admit, it was a little strange, but..." Hermione began, gnawing at her lower lip. "Oh, you can't just keep trying to think that way. It isn't healthy! If you want to be sad, be sad! Goodness knows the rest of us are. We'll... get better, eventually. Things will return to normal."

"They haven't yet." Tonks said, eyes opening slightly. "Because no one's really sure whether Malfoy's right or if Harry's really..."

"We'll have to try catching Pansy later. See what Malfoy's on about, yeah?" Ginny said. "Right, I think that's enough. Let's get out of here, too."

"And do what?" Asked Hermione.

"It's a bright, sunny day. Let's go see the giant squid. No one's been hanging out on the grounds as of late due to the war. Dumbledore's still a little wary over letting the younger students out there by themselves. I think we'll be fine." Ginny said. "We stared death in the face and came out on top. Being alone on school grounds won't do us in."

Tonks smirked slightly. "Yeah. ...Yeah, you're probably right. Sorry for forcing you two to help keep me in line all the time."

"Oh, stop it." Hermione said. "We're your friends. You're not forcing us to do anything."

"Yeah, stop pouting around and let's go see if we can get the squid to huck merpeople through the air like he used to. Haven't seen him do that in years..." Ginny said.

Tonks got up and let herself be led out of the Great Hall. Hermione and Ginny chattered back and forth as they made their way outside. Tonks kept quiet, though this didn't seem to bother the other two. They'd gotten used to her silence as of late and took it in stride. She

wasn't trying to be so introverted, she just had a lot on her mind. Truth be told, she was anxious to talk to Malfoy by herself to see if he had reached the same conclusions she had. Wincing slightly as they stepped into the sun, Tonks scowled. This good weather was in dire contrast to her mood. Were she the type to just sit around moping, she would've been down in the Pit, avoiding people as much as possible. But she knew she couldn't do that. She knew she had to try and push onward, even if it hurt.

Sitting down lakeside, Tonks watched as Ginny stepped into the water and called out to the giant squid. After awhile, she started sending harmless spells off into the lake, creating little explosions on its surface. Hermione coaxed her on, as she was apparently growing annoyed that the squid was trying to apparently no-show. Tonks leaned back on her arms and watched with a smile on her face. Things were never going to be the same. Even if Harry turned up right then and there, they would still be missing too many of their old group to really go on like they used to. Losing Solieyu all over again, and Luna slipping away with him had been a hard blow to Tonks. She hadn't been there the first time he had died, after all. She tried keeping herself from being too depressed by thinking that they were still together, just somewhere far away.

Wherever Harry was, be it alive or dead, she knew she would see him again some day. She just hoped it would happen before she passed on. Before her line of thinking could get too far down that morbid path, an almighty splash got her to open her eyes. The squid had finally emerged, causing Ginny and Hermione to cheer. Unable to help herself, she laughed at how excited they were for such a silly thing to have occurred.

"Hey, do you think he'd toss us into the air?" Ginny asked, eyes growing wide.

"I am not going out there and being flung about by a squid." Hermione stated, arms crossing.

To this, Ginny's eyes narrowed as her grin grew larger. She took a slow step toward Hermione, who had the good grace to backpedal. Then the chase was on. Hermione let out an undignified squeak as

Ginny started after her, intent to get the bushy-haired girl to the middle of the lake one way or another. Hermione cried out for Tonks to help her, and Ginny tried to coax Tonks into helping her. Tonks just rolled her eyes and sprawled out on the grass, telling the two to help themselves.

She immediately wished that she had phrased it differently. The next thing she knew, she was hovering a few feet above the ground. Hermione and Ginny had stopped and were aiming their wands at her, both of them smiling impishly.

"...Oh I am going to hex you both for the rest of the year if you do what I think you're planning on doing..." Tonks said, casting a warning glare at the Gryffindors.

"It'll be worth it!" Ginny crowed. "Come on, Hermione. Let's see how far the squid can lob her!"

"Hermione!" Tonks cried out. "You traitor!"

"I asked for your help and you ignored me. I'm simply returning the favor." Hermione said, sweetly.

Hermione and Ginny levitated Tonks out into the lake, which proved to be a bit more difficult than either of them had thought, as it was proving quite difficult to swim and keep their spell going. Tonks was, therefore, bobbing and spinning slightly as they went, and she was crying out that she was somehow getting seasick in midair.

At the edge of what was once the Forbidden Forest, two pairs of eyes watched the scene unfold before them. One pair belonged to a tall, lanky man who was dressed in a dark cloak, a hood pulled up to hide his face. The other belonged to a man who was slightly shorter and more filled out, who was dressed similarly.

"Is this alright?" Asked the shorter man. "Just watching them, I mean."

"It has to be this way." Said the taller. "We'll meet again soon enough."

"Are... you sure you want to go through with this?" Asked the shorter.

"Of course."

A sigh. "You always did seem the type to be dead set in your ways. There's nothing to be done for it, then. I can't change your mind if it's already set."

"You said that like you were hoping I'd stop my plan." Said the taller, glancing aside at the other man.

"It just seems... difficult." The shorter man admitted, rubbing his left arm nervously. "We might be killed."

"If we're lucky, yes." Said the taller man, chuckling quietly. Pausing for a moment, he allowed his eyes to linger on the scene playing out before him. The giant squid had gotten hold of Tonks and had chucked her into the air, where she flailed about like a fish out of water for a few seconds before splashing back into the lake. She surfaced a minute later next to the giant squid, looking like a drowned rat. Through gritted teeth, she cried out for the squid to get revenge. Hermione and Ginny froze as the squid turned their way. A moment later and they, too, were sailing through the air as Tonks floated at the surface, giggling.

His voice noticeably quieter, the taller man said, "Come on. We still have to get to the other two and finish setting things up before I put my plan into motion. We have a lot to do and a small time frame to do it in. Let's go."

"By your command, my lord."

oOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: We have one chapter left, everyone. I know this chapter seems a bit rushed... and there's a reason for that. But you'll have to wait a bit to find out what that reason is. But even as the book races to its conclusion, more questions arise. Is Harry alive or dead?

What did Draco find out while he was away? Who were the men intruding on Hogwarts' grounds?

Well... I'm afraid it's going to be awhile before most of those are ever really answered. But the next chapter, which may just be a half-sized epilogue (I haven't decided yet), will shed some light on a few things. Maybe. Post-upload edit: It's an epilogue, but it's also 30.1kb...

I know how I'm going to let this story play out, and it's not the way any of you are probably thinking. In finishing the R-Series, I'm essentially planning to set up one gigantic cliffhanger. When will the mysteries be solved? Who knows. It may be tomorrow. It may be next week. It may be a thousand years in the future...

## Chapter 23 – Believe

Tonks stared blankly out the window as her mother drove them home. Her final bit of time at Hogwarts had passed surprisingly fast, given how slowly each day seemed to go by. She had, toward the very end, moved her things out of the Pit and rejoined the other seventh year girls back in Ravenclaw Tower. Something about sleeping in a smaller bed seemed to ease the pain in her chest when night rolled around. There was still no word about whether Harry was actually dead or whether he was alive and just missing somewhere.

Everyone was planning to meet back up at Number Twelve that summer, saying that they needed to make it a regular occurrence so that, at least once a year, everyone could get back together for awhile. Hermione had somehow managed to pull out being the highest-scoring student at Hogwarts, despite her absence for several months. As far as Tonks knew, she was going to study abroad for awhile before settling back down. She said that traveling to Germany had been an interesting experience, the war aside. Apparently it had instilled a bit of wanderlust in her.

Ginny hadn't done too poorly for herself, either, scoring higher than Ron had, much to her brother's great chagrin. When Tonks had asked, she had cocked her head and grinned, saying she always thought her brother Bill had a cool job. She had mentioned how boring Hogwarts life seemed after going to Germany with Harry. Ron, on the other hand, had apparently been in talks with Percy on how best to deal with the twins' joke shop. Ginny said that if Ron and Percy didn't take command of the place in Fred and George's absence, it would surprise her.

Malfoy and Pansy had vanished from Hogwarts a week after the former had returned. They had left no note on where they were going and hadn't corresponded with anyone since then. Even Narcissa Malfoy didn't know where on earth her son had taken off to so suddenly. This was, perhaps, one of the things that had helped Tonks move forward each day. The thought that, just maybe, Malfoy had gotten some kind of lead on Harry's whereabouts and was just trying to get proof before letting anyone know one way or the other. She

didn't know if they were going to show up at Number Twelve that summer, but she was hoping.

Stargazer, having spent most of the year guarding an empty sanctuary, had asked to be released from his contract so that he might wander the planet. Unable to help herself, Tonks kept imagining the beholder floating along after Hermione as she went from place to place, investigating and learning. In Harry's place, Tonks had agreed and the beholder was set free. Before he left, he had said something strange. Through the months Harry and company had been absent, he thought he had seen and heard something near the fireplace. He never got a clear look at it, and the sound was far too faint to clearly work out the source. Tonks had searched all around the fireplace and sound nothing, though she wondered what it might have been. To the best of her knowledge, the only thing that should have been in the Pit during their leave should have been Dobby and Stargazer.

Gryffindor had won the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup that year, which made them almost intolerable to be around. The Ravenclaw team had never quite recovered after it had lost Harry, and with Malfoy and seemingly half their House gone, Slytherin certainly wasn't up to it. Hufflepuff had given it their all and had almost pulled an upset, though the Gryffindors had caught the Snitch in the end. It was fitting enough, Tonks thought, especially since they had dedicated both victories to the memory of Fred and George.

Blowing out a sigh, Tonks turned her gaze forward. They were getting closer to home, though it didn't feel right. Harry wasn't with her. And while he didn't have any Dursleys to go home to now, he also wasn't around to be with anyone else. He had never had a chance to be truly free. She felt her mother reach over and clasp her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. She smiled weakly at the older woman. They would get by, somehow. She wouldn't be 'fine' for a long time, but they would survive.

As Andromeda pulled into the driveway, she looked at her daughter and asked, "What's on your mind, Nymmy?"

"Same thing as always." Tonks said, voice quiet.

"Hungry at all?"

"Not really..."

Andromeda chuckled quietly. "That's always a good way to indicate just how upset you are, you know."

"Oh, hush." Tonks said, fighting the urge to stick her tongue out. Sighing again, she closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Everyone else knows what they want to do, but... here I am, still with no clue what I want to be."

"What did Harry want to be?" Asked Andromeda.

"Dunno. If he ever talked about a future beyond fighting Voldemort, it's been so long that I can't remember it. All he ever thought about was the fight." Tonks said.

"And you haven't heard from Draco or Pansy yet?"

Tonks shook her head. "Not a peep. Thinking about sending Hedwig after them, though. I've held back this long because I didn't want to blow their cover if they're trying to keep a low profile, but..."

"But you want to know."

"Yeah."

"Well... you can think about what you want to write tonight and send it first thing tomorrow, okay? Come on. Let's get inside before it's completely pitch black out here." Andromeda said, opening her door.

Tonks nodded and followed her mother into the house. It felt too big here, now, like it had gotten used to three people living in it again. Kicking her shoes off carelessly, Tonks told her mother that she was going to go lay down and headed upstairs. She didn't bother turning the light on in her room as she entered. She knew where things were in the dark. Throwing herself onto her bed, she lightly hit her pillow.

"Jerk... leaving me like this... s'not fair, Harry..." She murmured.

Rolling over, she hugged at her pillow and stared across the room. She hated trying to sleep alone after so long. It was one of the things she had never been able to do easily since returning from Germany. Her body had long since grown accustomed to short bursts of sleep and insomnia. She didn't mind so much, as her dreams tended to be pretty bad still. The less time she spent asleep, the better, as far as she was concerned.

Closing her eyes and leaning against the pillow, she whispered, "Come back already. Please..."

Though she still needed to think, mostly about what the future held in store and what she wanted to say to Malfoy, her body wouldn't listen. Though it had gotten used to a general lack of sleep, it still didn't like it. And, back in a familiar setting, it seemed like all of the exhaustion she had been trying to hide from everyone had crept up on her the moment she let her guard down. Unable to stop herself, Tonks had fallen asleep.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

The next few days passed by without Tonks really taking in any of them. She got up, went through her usual out-of-school routines, and went back to bed. She was trying to think as little as possible so as to not altogether depress herself again. She had sent Hedwig off, but the owl had returned without any reply. She knew that Malfoy at least got her letter, even if he hadn't responded to it. It meant he and Pansy were still alive. That was good enough for now, she figured.

Just after dinner on the night before she was going to visit Number Twelve, she decided she needed to get out of the house. To walk for a bit as she digested. She needed to clear her head and sitting around obviously wasn't getting the job done. Informing her mother where she was planning to go, she put on a jacket and left the house. It was a strangely chilly evening, with rain threatening to fall from darkened clouds at any given moment.

Hands slipping into pants pockets, she let her eyes unfocus a bit as she traveled down the sidewalk that led up the road. Without really actively choosing her destination, she found it nonetheless. Looking around, she smiled weakly. She had made it to the park she had met Harry at. Had he ever been that tiny and meek? Walking over to the largest object, she knelt down next to it, peeking into the opening underneath it. Harry had been sleeping down there after running away from the Dursleys. She had found him after ditching her mother. So many things had worked out just right for them to meet up.

Glancing around underneath the playground equipment, she figured she was still small enough to fit. Crawling under it, she had to curl up slightly, but she was able to hide under it. Thunder cracked off in the distance and she closed her eyes. If she imagined it hard enough, maybe Harry would come back and ask her what SHE was doing, upset and hiding under a kid's play place. Her eyes opened as lightning flashed somewhere nearby. She was just about to get out from her spot when the skies opened up.

"...Damn it, are you kidding me?" She muttered under her breath, poking her head out long enough for it to get damp. Scowling, she ducked back under the equipment, which was still quite good at keeping the rain out, and pushed some of the gravel-like material up at the entrance to her hiding spot. She wasn't sure it would keep any rain out, but she also didn't want to risk it. The last thing she wanted was to catch a cold before going to Number Twelve. She hadn't even thought to bring her wand with her, either.

"Getting absent-minded." She said, fidgeting slightly. She wasn't as short as she used to be. If she had to camp out under the playground equipment all night like Harry had, she was certain she was going to be aching pretty badly come morning's light. Her mother would probably also wonder where the hell she had gone. The chances of Andromeda thinking to look under the equipment was pretty low.

Another scowl escaped her lips. Tucking her right arm under her head, she tried settling in, hoping idly that there weren't any creepy bugs or anything that wanted to hide with her. Eyes slipping shut, she blew out a sigh. The rain was coming down fairly strong. At least she wouldn't have too much trouble drifting off. She was going to almost

have to nap to try and stave off boredom. For a moment, she thought about just pulling her jacket over her head and making a run for it. But she would get drenched no matter what she tried at this point. Best to just try and wait it out and hope her mother would understand.

Indeed, the rain helped her fall asleep, though it took longer than she would have liked. When her eyes next opened, she wasn't entirely sure what time it was. It was somewhere between light and dark, though she didn't think it was the same evening she had left on. The rain had stopped falling at some point, and the wind was blowing pretty heavily. She only knew this because she had to stretch and was surprised when her arms were suddenly hit by the wind.

Brow creasing, she pulled them back under the equipment she had slept under. It was still and warm under there, and it really shouldn't have been. Frowning, she stuck her hand back out. The minute it passed the entrance to the hiding spot, the cold wild licked at it again. This was... different. Pulling the gravel back where it should have been, she crawled out, wincing as she stretched properly. Her back wasn't happy with her at all, nor were her legs. Through the wind, she could hear an odd sort of creaking noise. She had heard it somewhere before, though she wasn't entirely sure where. As she sat there, trying to straighten her poor, aching body out, it came to her. It was the sound of an old, rusty chain!

Cocking an eyebrow, she turned to look toward the swings. And, sure enough, the chains were the source of the noise. Her interest in the chains was, however, short-lived, as it wasn't the wind that was causing the swing to move. Sitting in it, lightly pushing it back and forth and staring off at some point on the horizon, was Harry. He looked pretty rough, too. His hair was longer and messier than she remembered it, he had bags under his eyes, his robes were slightly tattered and dirty, and he had the distinct problem of only having one arm. He was holding onto the swing's chain with his left hand, but his right sleeve hung empty at his side.

Hardly believing what she was seeing, Tonks stood up, staring at Harry and unable to move toward him for fear that he might disappear again. Her movement stirred the gravel at her feet and snapped Harry

out of whatever thoughts he was having. He looked her way, his tired eyes meeting hers as he gave her an equally-tired smile.

"Lo, Nym." He said, his voice sounding hoarse, as though he hadn't used it much lately.

"Harry...?" Tonks said, hesitantly, as she slowly advanced on him.

"M'not goin' anywhere." Harry said. "Not gonna vanish again."

Sure enough, as she drew nearer, Harry stayed where he was, watching her with interest as she approached. Her hand raised when she was within reach of him, shakily moving toward the hand he still had clutching the swing's chain. He quickly shot it out and grabbed hold of her hand before she could get to him, however. Squeezing it softly, he whispered, "I'm sorry."

It felt as though someone had punched Tonks in the stomach. The knot that had been there for so long had returned, twice as big as before. And all of the emotion she had tried to hold back was returning with force. Tears welling in her eyes, she flung herself at him, screaming his name as she knocked him backwards out of the swing. He yelped as his head smacked the gravel underneath, his legs still tangled up on the swing alongside most of Tonks' body.

He sighed as she beat on his chest and sobbed against his shoulder, demanding to know what the hell he was playing at, turning up out of the blue after vanishing the way he did. Knowing he wouldn't be able to get a word in edgewise until she had gotten everything out of her system, that's just what he let her do. Arms wrapping around her, he held onto her as tightly as he could until he felt her breathing slow down once more.

"It's a long story." He murmured, rubbing at her back soothingly.

"I've got the time." Tonks said, her voice quiet.

"I... Balthazar did something when the third lock was released. Best I can tell, he made a move to take over my body. I was having to fight it every second the Susceptor was active. Even when it had ended,

and I'd pushed Voldemort back through the Void, I was fighting it. But... I was tired. The Susceptor took a lot out of me, Nym. More than I thought it ever could. For a moment, he managed to wrest control away from me. I think Luna noticed. I'm not sure. I could hear Draco getting closer, and I had to do something, because Balthazar wanted all of you dead.

"I somehow managed to gain control for a split second and apparated away. I didn't care where I ended up, I didn't care what happened to me. All I cared about was that no one else die. I couldn't let him hurt any of you. I...threw the rest of my power behind it. And that was a mistake..."

"What happened?" Asked Tonks, getting up off of Harry and sitting next to him.

Pulling his legs down from the swing, Harry sat up as well. "I... ended up in Brazil."

"...Brazil?!"

"Yeah. Only I didn't know it at the time. See... I guess I overloaded my own system or something when I threw so much weight behind randomly getting away. Managed to put myself in a bloody coma. I only woke up about two weeks ago. They were just about to take me off life support, apparently. They knew who I was - uh... 'they' being the people in the hospital. Couldn't speak the language well, but I was found by wizarding folk. Finally had a little luck where it was needed, huh? Anyway... they had all but given up on me when they noticed what the Gauntlet was doing. They hadn't really paid too much attention to it directly, since they were... y'know... more concerned about keeping me alive and all. But they finally paid attention to the Gauntlet. Which was what was keeping me out." Harry explained, rubbing at the bridge of his nose.

"Balthazar?"

"What was left of him. Must've done some kind of damage to him when I overloaded my system. But he was still trying to take command. The Gauntlet had been slowly inching its way up my arm

since I'd landed. Had they not noticed it when they did, I might not have been salvageable. If he had taken control, I would've replaced Voldemort. I'm certain of that. From what they told me, they basically took my arm off right then and there. No fancy methods, they just clean-cut it off near the shoulder before the Gauntlet could creep up past it. They spent a good while making my shoulder look presentable. It actually looks pretty decent. Here, check it out..." Harry said, slipping his robe off and pulling the sleeve of his shirt up to expose the spot where his right arm should have connected to the rest of his body.

Save for a small, criss-crossing scar in the center, it was tough to tell it had ever looked differently. The skin was smooth and mostly unmarred from the emergency magical surgery. Tugging his sleeve back down and his robes back up, he smirked. "With the parasite gone, I regained consciousness pretty quickly. From there, it was getting ahold of Albus and asking for help back over here. Still not back to full. Casting's a little off. Did I do the spell over there right? Wanted to protect you from the elements. Was raining pretty hard when I got back in town..."

"Yeah, was fine..." Tonks said. She felt almost like she was in shock. It was a lot to try and take in. It almost felt unreal to her. "So... Dumbledore got in touch with you? How long have you been back in the country?"

"Bout three days, I guess. The trip really took a lot out of me. Was resting at the school. I'm sorry I didn't try contacting you, Nym, I really am. But after I woke up, things just happened rapid-fire. Figured a letter would be useless, anyway, given how soon I was planning to return. We should go back to Brazil sometime. Gorgeous place. Good food, too. God, felt like I gained back all the weight I'd lost while I was in a coma in the few days it took for my letter to get to Albus and for him to get to me." Harry said, leaning back on his arm and grinning up at the sky.

"So... uh... now what?" Asked Tonks. "This is... all..."

"Hard? Yeah, I know. I've been rambling a lot. Tell you what. Let's go back to your house, you can get a change of clothes, and I can get

ahold of everyone else. Albus said you guys were going to head for Sirius' house today. Gonna have a lot of explanations to give, so I might as well wait to give them in front of everyone." Harry said.

"You ever run across Pansy and Malfoy? They've been out searching for you. Malfoy was convinced you weren't dead." Tonks said.

"Sounds like him." Harry said. "No, never saw 'em. Draco's probably going to be pissed he didn't find me early, though."

"More likely to punch you square in the jaw. Fair warning." Tonks said. "Hell, I feel like punching you square in the jaw right now, you ass. Vanishing like that right after Luna died, and Leon laying down as the hold over his soul went away. I felt like I had lost everything that day! And then you just turn up with this wild explanation and expect me to just buy it?!"

"No... I don't expect you to buy it. Not right away. I can show you as much as I can recall through my pensieve, though. Maybe take you to see Henry and Julia. They were the ones who found me. Middle aged, but damn funny. Helped keep my spirits up. Was pretty depressed after I found out how long I'd been in my coma... I didn't know what happened after I apparated. Albus has since filled me in best he can. I suspect you guys will tell me the rest. When he told me you were alright, it felt like a weight had been taken off my shoulders."

"How'd you know I was here, anyway?" Asked Tonks.

"Didn't. Just... felt like walking around a bit before stopping in at your house. Had a lot to try and work out in my head. Got nostalgic as I passed this place, figured I'd see if I could still fit under that damn thing. And then there you were, curled up. I thought about waking you up, but the bags under your eyes are worse than the ones under mine. So I did a small spell to make it more tolerable under there, and I've been swinging since." Harry explained.

Sighing, Tonks stood up, her legs wobbling slightly. "I think I need some aspirin. This is going to take a long time to get straight, isn't it?"

Pushing himself up as well, Harry nodded. "Probably. At least we'll both get some proper sleep now, though. ...Going to miss being able to hold you properly, though. Need to talk to Albus, see what the wizarding world can do for fake arms. If they have fake eyes as good as Moody's was, surely they can rig up a usable arm..."

"Pretty sure those exist. Like you said, you can ask Dumbledore. Well... come on. Mum's going to have a fit when she sees you, though." Tonks said, rubbing at the back of her head. There was an odd sort of irritating pressure sitting between her eyes.

"Yeah, I'm not looking forward to the next few days. Gonna be a lot of talking. Throat hurts from barely getting any liquid in it. They did their best to keep my systems functioning properly, but they weren't miracle workers. So... um..."

"Yeah?"

"I know... I don't deserve it still. I know I shouldn't even be asking at this point, considering what I did to you and everyone else. Do you..." Harry trailed off, but she caught him glancing down at her hands.

"...Of course, you jackass. Just because I'm mad at you doesn't mean I don't want to eventually get married." Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "Any other stupid questions?"

"None off the top of my head." Harry said, taking Tonks by the hand as they started walking back towards her house. "...Though I'm sure I could think of some, if you'd like!"

"Such as?" Tonks asked, sounding just shy of exasperated. To say nothing of being more than a little wary at what Harry could think of.

"Well... how about questions about the future?" Harry suggested. "I could ask what kind of house you want to live in."

"I want somewhere out of the city. Somewhere peaceful. I've had enough excitement to fill six lives. So somewhere quiet." Tonks said.

"Yeah, but what do you want the house to be like?" Asked Harry.

"I dunno. Two story place? I'm not the type of girly girl to get obsessive over interior decorating, you know." Tonks said. "Maybe - MAYBE - a small pool in the back yard so we can have parties with our friends in the summers. Number Twelve is nice and all, but... it's a bit gloomy at times, even with the redecorating..."

"Partying, huh? What, not planning to have kids together?" Harry asked, grinning slyly.

Tonks gave him a withering look. "Can you picture us being parents?"

"I can and have. You'd be a great mother." Harry said, smiling as she blushed. "C'mon, we'd be awesome parents. No one would dare pick on our kids!"

"Planning to have more than one, huh? Don't think I haven't noticed it's always 'kids' instead of just 'kid.'" Tonks said.

"Either way. One's fine with me." Harry said, chuckling. "...Hey, there's a good follow-up question! What about a name?"

"A name? What, for the kid that has yet to be?" Tonks asked, really wishing she had that aspirin.

"Sure! Why not? Go on then. Pansy was giggling about how she and Draco were plotting out children names one night when we were in Ur'terash. Now there's a pair I can't imagine as parents." Harry said.

"Pansy I could see, but Malfoy? I dunno... that'd be a tough sell." Tonks said. "...Oh, go on then. What names did they throw around?"

"They settled on a naming method. If it's a girl, Pansy gets to name it. If it's a boy, Draco gets to name it. Kinda hope Pansy wins this dice toss, to be honest. Said she picked out 'Viola Alexandria' as a name. Sounded pretty good to me."

"What about Malfoy?" Asked Tonks.

Doing his best to drawl like Malfoy, Harry replied, "Hydrus Zirnitra."

"...What."

"That's what I said! You'd think with all the name taunts he got, he'd name the poor kid something a little more normal."

"Bah, normal is boring." Tonks said. "Besides, if we have a kid, I wanna keep the family's naming trend alive."

"Naming trend? What, after stars and stuff?" Asked Harry.

"Yeah. With Sirius gone and mum pretty unlikely to have any more kids... I'm technically the last one who can carry it on. Certainly not expecting Malfoy to do it. Not if he's chosen that goofy name for his son." Tonks said.

"So what do you think? I've heard it's customary in some wizarding families to name your kids after other relatives or close friends." Harry said. "Not thinking of naming our kid 'Sirius' if it's a boy, are ya?"

"Nah. There's only one Sirius." Tonks said, smiling faintly. "I dunno. How about..."

"Arcturus!" Crowed Harry suddenly.

Tonks stared at him incredulously. "No little boy of mine is going to be named ARCTURUS. I hate my name, but I'm gonna keep our child's name simple."

Harry gnawed idly at his lower lip for awhile before suggesting, "Altair? That's a bit more simple, yeah?"

"Think up a middle name, too. Gotta flow well. Can't just have two names smushed together and expect it to flow well into your last name, ya know." Tonks said.

"Altair something Potter." Harry said. "...Yeah, I dunno. What're we thinking for middle names? Keeping with the celestial theme or doing a more normal one?"

"Doesn't matter to me. If you can somehow make it flow well, I'm fine either way." Tonks admitted.

"Where's an Astrology book when ya need it?" Harry muttered to himself.

"Vega." Tonks said, suddenly.

"Vega?" Repeated Harry. "Vega what?"

Tilting her head in thought, Tonks mouthed a few possible combinations before vocalizing one. "Vega Cygnus."

"Vega Cygnus Potter?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, what do you think? Too much?"

"Nah, sounds fine to me." Harry said. "What about if it's a girl?"

"I've always wished my name was Lyra instead of... ugh... what it is. I'd kinda like Lyra to be her name if it's a girl." Tonks said.

"Middle name ideas? You seem to be on a roll, Nym." Harry said, grinning crookedly. "You sure you haven't thought about this before?"

"...Maybe." Tonks said, quickly and under her breath. A bit louder, she pondered, "Hm... middle name for a girl... I dunno. Can't think any constellation names that would fit in between 'Lyra' and 'Potter,' can you?"

"Maybe take the 'normal middle name' route here?" Suggested Harry.

"Yeah, might be a better idea. Any ideas there?" Asked Tonks. "Maybe some kinda flower, in honor of your mum and, at least towards the end, your aunt?"

"I've never been good with herbology. Only one I can think of off the top of my head is 'Iris' and I'm not entirely sure how well 'Lyra Iris Potter' flows..." Harry said.

"Well, we have plenty of time to work out the details. Not like I plan on having a kid any time soon, after all. First things we need to do are to get a nice house, figure out what the hell we're going to spend our lives doing, and forcing you to explain in greater detail what on earth happened in Germany. Not in that order." Tonks said.

"Tsk. Was hoping to distract you away from that." Harry said, putting his hand into his pocket. "Ah well. You're right. We've got all the time in the world."

Tonks rolled her eyes, patting Harry comfortingly on the back. They were almost back at Tonks' house now, and for some reason, she couldn't quite shake an odd feeling still lurking in the pit of her stomach. Harry was back and, for the most part, seemed to be no worse for wear. Especially given what had transpired after defeating Voldemort. So why the hell were her hands shaking ever so slightly? Why did she feel so nervous? Why was she second guessing everything he had said since they had started talking?

Why did it feel as though something, somewhere, had gone terribly wrong?

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Author's Notes: And so the R-Series... or... R-1, as I've been calling it for awhile now, has come to an end. Or has it? This ending and the one in the previous chapter seems to lean the other way, don't they? As though something wasn't quite right. As though things weren't quite the way they were supposed to be.

Well, that's because it's true. This isn't the proper ending. But that isn't going to come for a little while now. The basis of any good story is to leave 'em wanting more. And I hope, after seven books, I've managed to make you want more. Because I have so much more planned. Two projects, which may or may not run alongside one another, are planned. There's the F-Series, which I'm still doing reconstruction work on from the alpha version some of you saw during the time I was having computer problems awhile back. And then there's R-2. A DIRECT sequel to this series, as opposed to the

F-Series, which takes place chronologically 1,000 years in the future, give or take.

Though I'm going to probably be alternating - I'll update R-2 one week and F-Series another and so on (helps prevent burnout, I reckon. This isn't set in stone yet, though...) - the proper order for these will be R-1, F-Series, R-2. But there's not really anything in R-2 that won't make sense if you skip the future series. It's just going to explain a few things that are GOING to leave people confused. Harry having both arms, for instance. And the right one isn't a fake. So why does he have that when he clearly got it blown off? You'll have to read on to find out. F-Series is going to be where the TRUE ending to R-1 here plays out, through a series of flashbacks. Originally I was planning there to just be an 8th book detailing the true ending. But then I figured, given how closely the F-Series is going to tie in, it'd probably be a better idea to just explain it all through the course of that series! It's also going to be seven books. If I can pull that shit off again. R-1 has taken somewhere in the realm of 5 years to write, and is the first COMPLETED project I've ever written. Well... I guess it technically isn't over yet, but you know what I mean. Over half a million words isn't chump change.

I'm going to take a brief break. Probably a month or less. I always say I'll be taking time off longer than I actually do. But I only have a bare bones idea of where I want F-Series to go. There are certain milestone moments I need to have happen. Obviously the true ending to R-1 fills a couple of those out. The F-Series is gonna be like R-1 here was. The protagonist is gonna be powerful as crap by the end, lotsa action-y scenes and whatnot. R-2, however...? Well, that's another story. R-2 is going to be more character driven. There's seven books planned, but I doubt they'll be quite as long as R-1 or the F-Series are. It's going to be a fair bit of angst and a lot of emotional stuff. Love will play a big part in it. But you know me, I love doing things differently!

Thank you all for reading this far. It's because of you that I've been able to continue. There's nothing worse than starting a lot fanfic series by someone only to find out it's been abandoned. I promised myself I wouldn't abandon this project. And after writing them so long, in my mind, I can't help but feel like my take on things is the 'proper'

one, as stupid as that sounds. I can't go back to the canon anymore. I've spun this web into a monster and I've got to be the one to face it down. The ride isn't over yet, boys and girls. Check back soon. Things are about to get crazy.

Not every story has a happy ending. And not all heroes are heroic.

I'll see you in the sequels!